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To Protect and Serve

by janemac24

Summary

Regina Mills is a decorated detective in the Boston Police Department, known for being outstanding at her job but outstandingly difficult to work with. Emma Swan is a driven rookie assigned to be her new partner. What happens when they find themselves thinking of each other as more than just coworkers?

Notes

Hello, thank you for clicking my story. This was written in response to a prompt for a "Swan-Mills detective story" and is influenced in part by the vibe and dynamics on SVU, and Rizzoli & Isles before that show started to suck. I hope you enjoy reading. This story comes with several disclaimers and warnings, which are detailed below.

1. First and foremost, I obviously don't own Once Upon a Time or its characters. Nor do I own any of the crime shows this story draws inspiration from. I make no profit from this story, and I don't wish to be sued.

2. I am not involved with law enforcement and have no knowledge of police work, forensics, etc. beyond what is available on Wikipedia and what I've seen on TV. In other words, I know nothing. If you want to complain about errors of that nature, feel free, but it's not going to change anything because I still know nothing. It's not about the cases, anyway.

3. This fic has Swan Queen as endgame, but it is slow-burn. Repeat: Slow. Burn. AKA there will also be other ships explored/mentioned in real-time or flashbacks. I promise no excessively graphic descriptions of sex with said beards, because ewww heterosexuality, but still...You. Have. Been. Warned.

4. The M rating on this story is not so much for sexxaytimes (there may be some eventually) but the dark/potentially triggering nature of things homicide detectives may deal with. I promise to post specific warnings on relevant chapters if you're concerned.

If you want to continue reading after all of that, please go right ahead, and if you send me reviews, I will love you like Hook and Regina love the floor.

Chapter 1

"You can't be serious," Detective Regina Mills protests, staring at her lieutenant in furious disbelief. She can't believe he called her into the station early for this. It's almost as if he delights in finding ways to make her angry.

"But I am. Completely serious."

"Do I have a neon sign on my back that says 'pair me with rookies?'" she seethes. She's been in this unit for twelve years now; she deserves a good partner for once. "I just finished breaking in Humbert, and now another? Is this because I'm a woman and supposedly have more patience? Because let me tell you: I don't."

"Oh, I know all about your patience," Lieutenant Locksley chuckles. "And no, this has nothing to do with you being a woman and everything to do with you being the most senior detective in the unit now that Spencer's retired."

"You stuck me with that idiot Jones even when Spencer was still around," she complains petulantly.

"Because Spencer's an asshole."

"And I'm not?"

"Of course you are. If anything, you're worse." Locksley's grinning like the idiot he is, an idiot who's known her for far too long and has far too many tactics for getting on her nerves.

"Great, so pair her with Nolan. He'll shoot rainbows and sunshine out of his ass and make her feel right at home."

"I don't want her to feel right at home. I want her to actually learn to do proper detective work, so I'm pairing her with you. Besides, if I pair her with Nolan, you'll be stuck with Jones."

Regina sighs. She can't believe this is actually happening to her, again. "Fine," she harrumphs. "I'll work with this Detective Sven, but if she turns out to be an incompetent moron like Jones and Nolan-"

"Swan," Locksley corrects. Regina glares at him, incensed at being interrupted mid-rant.

"Excuse me?"

"Her name. It's Emma Swan."

"Do I look like I care what her name is, Lieutenant?"

"Well, she is your new partner, and you're bordering dangerously on insubordination, Detective Mills," he says teasingly. Not that he'd ever write her up for anything; she has way too much material for blackmail, and he knows it. She can't report his lack of professionalism for the same reason.

"Shove it, Locksley. I will work with this...Detective Swan." She spits the name out like it leaves an unpleasant taste in her mouth. "But if she turns out to be an incompetent moron, I'm transferring departments so I don't have to put up with your bullshit anymore. Are we finished here?"

"I believe we are."

"Then good day, Lieutenant," she growls before storming out, slamming his office door in her own face.

"Always a pleasure, Regina," he says with a smirk.

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Emma Swan shoves the last bite of her Pop-Tart into her mouth and curses the traffic on Storrow Drive, knowing she should have picked a

better route to work for her first day in Homicide. She'd left her apartment at a decent enough hour, so she probably won't be late, but she also won't be as early as she'd like to be.

To say that the twenty-eight year old detective is intimidated would be an understatement. The news of her transfer to homicide came only three months after her promotion, and she'd spent those three months in Computer Crimes. She'd never expected the transfer to be accepted so fast - apparently the old boys' club of the Homicide Unit is full of vacancies now that the old boys keep retiring. She's excited, but damn, this is scary. This is the big leagues. She'll be working with detectives whose casework she studied while she was in the academy, and they'll have to accept her as one of their own.

Practically shaking with nerves, she decides to call her son - that always makes her feel better.

"Hey, Mom!" Henry says happily.

"Hey, kid! I miss you so much! How's New York."

"New York is awesome, but I miss you, too. You're starting your new job today, right?"

"Yup - homicide. I get to catch the big-time bad guys now."

"So cool!" he exclaims. "You're gonna make sure they all get locked up, right?"

"Yeah, kid. Definitely." The ten-year-old's enthusiasm for life always buoys her confidence. "Hey, have a great day at school. Put your dad on the phone, okay?"

"Hello?" her ex-boyfriend sounds like he just woke up, but she has no doubt he's actually been a responsible parent all morning. That's just his voice.

"Hey, Neal. Just checking in to see how everything's going over there."

"Everything's great. Henry's report card came yesterday, all A's except for a B+ in gym. He's really doing well at the new school - he even likes math now."

"That's awesome. You're bringing him up to Boston next weekend, right?"

"Of course. I told him we could take the Amtrak. He's pumped up - and he can't wait to see you again, obviously."

"The feeling's mutual," Emma says distractedly, trying to focus on the road for a moment. "Actually, I'm about to pull into the station. Can I say bye to him really quick?"

"Yeah, sure. Henry!"

About ten seconds later, her son's voice is back on the line. "Hi again," he giggles.

"Hey, kid, just wanted to say I love you. Be good for Dad, and stay safe, okay? I'll see you next weekend."

"I love you, too, Mom. And you stay safe, too!"

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"Detective Swan? I'm Robin Locksley, your new lieutenant."

I'm your new lieutentant, Regina mouths mockingly. Could he be any more pompous? Like he had even earned that rank - how dare he swoop in with his winning smile and his "people skills" and take the promotion that she deserved? She had a better closure rate, and all of his so-called "brilliant accomplishments" were from when they were partners.

"Your desk is here," he explains. "And this is Detective Regina Mills. She'll be your partner."

"For now," Regina snaps.

Locksley rolls his eyes. "Yes, for now. With so many new detectives coming in, we've been rotating partners quite frequently, trying to find combinations that work well together. Detective Mills, I trust you can catch your new partner up on all your open cases." Before he walks away, he leans into her ear and whispers, "Be nice."

She snorts, eyes raking up and down her new partner's frame. She's tall, with long blonde hair, and looks like she works out. Good - she'd been worried about getting some soft, flabby computer geek who couldn't handle a foot chase. Aside from the awestruck gleam in her eyes, Detective Swan looks pretty tough. She must be - it takes something special to move up through the ranks so quickly.

"You're the Regina Mills," her new partner observes, her tone almost reverent.

"You've heard of me?" Regina asks uncomfortably. Of course she's heard of her - everyone in the damn city has heard of her after that horror show known as the White case ten years ago. The press and her fellow officers have painted her as some kind of hero or martyr, a completely ridiculous notion after what actually happened.

Emma nods breathlessly. "We studied your work in the academy. You're a legend; you're a-"

"If you say 'hero,' this partnership is finished right now," Regina warns, eyes blazing.

"I was going to say you're a great cop," Emma says quickly. Regina scowls.

"We're going to have to work on your poker face before you start questioning suspects. And we're going to have to work on that jacket before I allow myself to be seen in public with you. It's completely undignified."

"What? This?" Emma gestures to her red leather jacket in surprise. Apart from the color, it looks fairly similar to what everyone else in the

squad room is wearing. Except for Regina, of course. Regina is dressed in a suit and could walk into any board meeting downtown without looking out of place.

"Lieutenant Locksley may not have a problem with the Homicide Squad looking like a bunch of classless thugs, but I do. And I will not work cases with you if you don't make at least some attempt to look like a professional!"

"Uhh...right. Noted," Emma mumbles. "I'll dig out the blazers tomorrow morning."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now," she says, dropping a thick stack of files on the new detective's desk, "start reading."

"Pardon?"

"Reading. You're familiar with the act, I presume? These are our open cases."

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After about two hours getting caught up on open cases, Emma is starting to lose focus. Detective Mills is meticulous about her paperwork, which she supposes is a good thing, but it makes so much more to read. And her new partner has been sitting at the desk across from her, doing even more paperwork. The other woman has incredible concentration - she hasn't looked up the entire time. Emma knows, because she's been watching.

She can't believe she's getting a chance to work with the legendary Regina Mills, who has been one of her idols since she first heard about the White case. Detective Mills's heroics were what inspired her to become a cop in the first place. She still has an clip from one of the newspaper articles taped to her wall at home, and she looks at it whenever she needs a reminder of why she puts in the long hours:

"As police officers, our job is to keep the City of Boston safe, to prevent its people from giving into fear and remind them that good can win. To lead by example, I have to overcome my own fear, and I will be returning to work as soon as possible after my doctors clear me."

She assumes her new partner's behavior is meant to intimidate her, but that won't happen. Sure, she's heard the rumors that Detective Mills is anything but easy to work with, but she can handle it. She understands. Female cops have to be tough-as-nails to earn respect. She has to earn her own before she can expect to be let in.

Her reverie is interrupted by Lieutenant Locksley's voice. "Mills, Swan," he calls from his office door. "Hit and run driver by the BU Bridge. One dead, several injured."

"Lieutenant, Nolan and I are up," one of the other detectives protests.

"It seems like a fairly straightforward case for our rookie to cut her teeth on," Locksley says pleasantly. "Sorry, Jones. You two will get the next one."

"Let's go," Mills orders. "Get your coat; I drive."

Emma raises her eyebrows and follows without a word. Her first homicide investigation - she hopes she doesn't screw it up.

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When they arrive at the scene, the perimeter has already been secured, and the paramedics are in the process of treating all the injured parties. It looks like about six cars were involved in the accident, and given the state of the vehicles, it's a miracle there was only one casualty.

Regina immediately approaches the Medical Examiner, who is standing outside the door of a badly crushed white sedan.

"Dr. Whale," she says, nodding her head politely but coldly in greeting. "What have we got?"

"Hello, Regina. White male, mid-forties. He looks to have died on impact, likely from a head injury. Here's his wallet - Massachusetts license, says his name is Mark Smith."

"Thank you," Regina says, quickly donning a set of gloves and taking the wallet from the M.E.'s hands.

"Crime scene techs are checking out the car," Whale informs the detectives. "I'll probably forego the full autopsy unless something suspicious pops up in the investigation."

"Excellent, I'll touch base with C.S.U. now." She's about to turn away when she remembers. "Oh, Detective Swan, this is Dr. Victor Whale, our Chief Medical Examiner."

"Emma Swan, nice to meet you," Swan says with an awkward wave, not wanting to shake hands with someone wearing bloodstained gloves. Probably a good idea not to touch Whale, ever, gloves or not, Regina thinks.

"The pleasure's all mine," Whale says, looking the tall blonde up and down with an impressed raise of his eyebrows.

Regina glares at him; if they could just get through one investigation without Whale engaging in some kind of lecherous behavior, she'd be thrilled. "Let us know if you find anything on the body," she orders the M.E.

The crime scene techs walk them through the accident, which seems like a straightforward collision caused by an idiot running a red light. Finding the hit-and-run driver is the top priority.

"Detective Swan," Regina says abruptly, "there are a bunch of uniforms taking witness statements over there. Go find out if there are any worth following up on."

"Sure, Boss, what am I looking for?"

Regina sighs: apparently, her new partner is an idiot with a penchant for infuriating nicknames. Wonderful. "Information about the vehicle at fault - description, plate numbers. Trust your instincts; it should be fairly obvious."

"Right." Emma jogs off in the direction of the crowd gathered around the edge of the crime scene tape, and Regina starts texting the victim's information to Detective Booth, hoping to find a next-of-kin.

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"So far, all we know it was a dark blue pickup truck - people seem to be in disagreement about whether it was two- or four- door. A few witnesses gave partial plates, but..."

"They're all different," Mills guesses. "Of course."

"So, what now?" Emma asks.

"We'll send the information to the boys back at the station, see if they can dig up any vehicle records to give us a lead. Meanwhile, we are going to pay a visit to the victim's wife before interviewing the witnesses at the hospital."

"The victim's wife?" Emma asks nervously. "You mean the dead guy?"

"Yes, his name is Mark Smith. I certainly hope you won't refer to him that way when we're talking to his wife."

"Right, sorry," Emma mutters.

"Have you ever done a notification before, Detective Swan?" Mills asks, gesturing for her to get in the passenger's seat of their unmarked cruiser.

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "Can't say that I have," she admits. "We didn't encounter many dead people in Computer Crimes."

"Well, you'll learn," the senior detective says in a tone that sounds almost sympathetic. "Let me do the talking and you'll see how it's done. You can just try to say something comforting, like 'I'm sorry for your loss.'"

"That's comforting?" asks Emma, nose wrinkled in distaste.

For just a second, a shadow passes over Detective Mills's bright brown eyes. "No, it's not," she agrees. "Not much is, but we try."

Both women are silent on the drive to the victim's house in Somerville, wrapped up in their own thoughts. Emma is nervous; she's always thought of her job in terms of catching the bad guys, rather than supporting the victims, but she's realizing that this other side of homicide investigation is going to quickly become a big part of her life.

Thankfully, her partner has been at this for a long time, and she knows what she's doing. Emma watches practically in awe as Regina introduces herself and Emma to Mrs. Smith and informs her, in a sensitive and compassionate tone unlike any she's heard from the senior detective so far, of her husband's passing. She offers her condolences and promises that they will do everything they can to find the person responsible.

Emma doesn't get a chance to say anything. She doesn't have to. The victim's wife is hanging on Detective Mills' every word. "You're good at this," she observes, after Mrs. Smith has identified her husband's body and a couple of uniforms are driving her home.

"Years of experience," her partner says tiredly.

"I've just never thought about it," Emma suddenly blurts out. "Telling someone their loved one is dead! I didn't realize, you know?"

"Few people do. It's one of the hardest parts of the job."

"You made it look so easy back there," Emma argues.

Regina lets out a small huff of air. "I used to work in the Sexual Assault Unit way back when, probably when you were still in high school. Compared to that..."

"Anything's easy?"

"I wouldn't necessarily say 'anything,' but, yes. You learn how to speak to people who are under emotional duress."

"Speaking of which, our next stop is Mass General, right?"

"Yes, we have five injured witnesses who are now all in stable condition," Mills reports. "Detective Booth got a call from the hospital while we were out."

They're halfway to the car when the older woman's phone starts buzzing. "Mills," she barks. "Oh, really? Yes, we'll be - Swan, take down this address!" Emma immediately whips her phone out of her pocket and types the address her partner repeats to her.

"What was that all about?" she asks when Regina hangs up the phone.

"Our witnesses at the scene said the hit-and-run driver was in a blue pick-up truck, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"A car matching that description with pretty severe denting on the front was just spotted in a parking lot two blocks from the original accident."

"That's pretty stupid, if it's the same car," Emma remarks. "Are we gonna go check it out?"

"Not just yet, we obviously need a search warrant first."

Emma looks at her feet. "Right, obviously. I knew that."

"I'm calling the ADA, then we'll let Booth take care of impounding the vehicle. He's working a desk today waiting for Humbert to get out of

court." She's already scrolling through her contacts. "Hello? Yes, hello, Miss Blanchard. This is Regina Mills. I need a search warrant for a car involved in a hit-and-run earlier today...Yes, I assume it was the one on the news...Get Judge Gold, he'll come through - if he says no, remind him he owes me a favor, anyway." They continue talking for a while longer (rather, Detective Mills continues barking orders) before hanging up.

"Well, what are you waiting for, Detective Swan? Get in the car!"

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Regina lets her new partner take care of the witness interviews at the hospital - she has to learn to swim on her own at some point, and it should be sooner rather than later. Detective Swan is a little awkward the first time - it's a teenage boy who's obviously shaken; he'd just gotten his license a month ago - but by Witness #5, she's an old pro. Regina considers paying her a compliment, but she doesn't want to make the rookie too comfortable on her first day. Where's the fun in that?

The witnesses all tell a similar tale: a dark blue pickup ran a red light, caused a huge pile-up in the intersection, and then drove off at a high rate of speed despite smoke billowing from its engine.

A phone call from Detective Booth confirms that the truck in the parking lot is definitely the one that caused the accident. The entire front bumper is smashed, and there's severe frame damage. The driver probably parked it so close to the crime scene because the crash rendered it practically un-drivable.

"It's registered to James Reilly of Dorchester," Regina reports after she gets off the phone. "He's a plumber. Booth and some unis are picking him up at a job as we speak. Are you ready to interrogate your first suspect?"

"That was fast," Swan remarks with considerable surprise.

"Yes, well, this was a very straightforward case for your first day. Nothing too emotionally scarring, I should hope." Or you won't last very long, she adds internally.

"I don't know, some of this driving stuff...my son's going to be a teenager in a few years. The thought of him out on those streets is a little scary, you know? There are some bad drivers out there."

Detective Swan has a son? Regina tries to hide her shock - she wouldn't have pictured the younger woman as a mother. But then, she has no reason to make such assumptions at all; they just met that very morning. "You have children? Be careful - this line of work can make you completely paranoid for their safety," she warns. "Cold-blooded serial killers and all."

"Well, your average person has a much higher chance of being in a car accident than facing off against a cold-blooded serial killer, so I rest my case."

"Point taken," Regina says coolly, trying to quickly rid her mind of the panicked thoughts attempting to infiltrate it. It's her own fault - she's the one who brought up cold-blooded serial killers in the first place. Sometimes she wonders if she isn't actively trying to make herself suffer.

"So..." Emma trails off.

"So, you have children?"

"A son - he's ten. He lives in New York with his father, so I don't see him as much as I might like, but...yes. I have a child."

"Ten?" Regina asks, before she can even stop herself. She's not trying to be judgmental - really, she's not - but Detective Swan seems quite young to be the mother of a ten year old.

"Yes, I had him when I was a teenager," Emma sighs. "I was stupid, blah blah blah, but I certainly don't regret his birth, and he's a great kid.

Doesn't really take after me or his father in that regard," she adds with a short laugh.

"I wasn't...I'm sorry," Regina quickly apologizes. "I didn't mean to pry into your personal life."

"Don't worry about it. I never mind talking about Henry. How about you? Any kids?"

"No, I don't," she says softly, keeping her eyes carefully focused on the road. Henry?

"Cool. Do any of the guys? The ones I met...I don't really see them as parental types. But, I mean, I've only known them for a few hours."

"Locksley has a son. He's four," Regina explains, grateful for the change in subject. She always hates these kinds of personal conversations, and she was the idiot who started it in the first place because of her damn curiosity. "You'll meet him; he visits the station sometimes. He's quite adorable. None of the others do, though I suspect Nolan wants to have about twelve, once he finds the right woman."

"He really likes kids, huh?"

"He's practically a child himself." Emma gives a small chuckle at the joke, though she doesn't know the man very well yet, and Regina is able to put her previous thoughts out of her mind, at least for now.

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The offending driver almost immediately confesses, which takes most of the fun out of interrogating him. Detective Jones whispers to Emma that Mills is basically foolproof at getting confessions out of a certain subset of male suspects who are easily distracted by her ample breasts or shiny hair. Emma has to agree that her partner is a beautiful woman, but she's almost offended that a "bad guy" would turn over so quickly. Regina makes their job look so easy.

A blood test confirms that his blood alcohol level is well above the limit, which explains most of his idiotic behavior, and his family confirms that he's had a drinking problem for quite some time. ADA Blanchard charges him with DUI and vehicular manslaughter and starts negotiating with his lawyer, a public defender who seems pretty wet behind the ears. Emma would know - she is, too.

"Blanchard's too soft," Mills complains. "Constantly making deals - ridiculous."

"She believes in second chances," Nolan argues. "Giving people the chance to reform their lives!"

"Idiot. A second chance to kill more people, that's what she's giving them!"

"Calm down, Regina," Locksley says lightly. "Well, everyone put in a good day's work today. It's a slow week so far, so let's close up shop. Humbert and Booth, you're on call tonight?"

"That's right, sir," Detective Humbert says quickly. Detective Booth nods beside him.

"Well, here's hoping for a quiet one. Goodnight, all."

"I love slow weeks," says Nolan, walking to the parking garage with Emma, Regina, and his partner, Detective Killian Jones.

"Me, too, mate. Let's get some rum!" Jones says eagerly. "Swan, we'll buy for you, since it's your first day."

"I'm in," Nolan agrees. "Mills?"

"I don't do rum," the senior detective says curtly. "I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

Jones shrugs. "Suit yourself," he laughs.

Emma follows Nolan and Jones - who insist on being called David and Killian after hours - to a drab, dirty bar called The Lion Flower. It's about what she would expect for a cop bar: greasy burgers and fries, cheap beer, some harder spirits for the grouchy, jaded old men (and Killian, apparently).

They're good guys; she has fun joking around with them after a day of trying and failing to impress her lifelong idol. Her first day in homicide was far from awful, sure, and she's glad they closed their joke of a case, but there's no escaping the fact that she spent much of it feeling incompetent.

She turns in early, making fumbling excuses to her two new coworkers, who are arguing over the professionalism of David pursuing his latest crush, who happens to be their ADA.

When she finally gets home, she quickly changes into flannel boxers and curls up under her blanket, but she can't sleep. Something's missing; it's been missing since Neal took Henry to New York. The apartment is too cold and too quiet, and she tosses and turns until she finally admits defeat and pads into Henry's old room. His teddy bear is still there - he claims he's too old for it now, so it stayed in Boston. She clutches it tightly to her chest, eventually falling asleep on her son's bed, wishing it was next weekend already and he was here with her.

xx

When Regina returns to her apartment, she seals all five of the locks on the door and turns on every light. Then she goes to each room and checks the window locks and makes sure the shower curtain is still open. Finally, she pours herself a generous tumbler of whiskey before returning to the living room, placing her service revolver on the coffee table as she settles onto the couch, still in her work clothes because she can't stand the thought of opening her closet.

She winces as the whiskey burns her throat, but if she swallows enough of it, she can maybe get some sleep tonight without dreaming of a

psychotic man with a knife, her fiancé's lifeless eyes, and a baby who will never draw breath.

She turns the TV on to the Weather Channel, as she has every night for the last ten years in the hope that enough background noise will help her forget she's alone.

Alone and still scared after all this time and so very lonely.

She gulps down the rest of the whiskey and squeezes her eyes shut. Sleep will eventually come, if she pretends long enough. She hears the weatherman talking about a cold front moving in from the North Atlantic, and the next thing she knows, it's morning again.

Chapter 2

"Regina, can we talk?"

"I'm pretty sure you're already talking."

Robin sighs. "I mean alone, in my office."

"I'm pretty sure there's nothing you have to say to me that can't be said in front of the entire squad, *sir,*" Regina challenges, eyes blazing. There's only one other person in the squad room, anyway: Detective Booth, and he's carefully ignoring their conversation.

"Don't fucking do this, Regina." He normally bears her insults with infuriatingly good humor, but for whatever reason, he has no patience for her today, and the thought makes her grin wickedly. When he's in a mood like this, she can get under his skin as well as he gets under hers.

"Do what?" she asks innocently. He just stares at her in exasperation until she relents and follows him into his office. "What's going on, Lieutenant?" she asks once the door is closed. "I'm fairly certain all my paperwork is filed properly, and I haven't gotten a complaint in over eighteen months, so it can't be about that-"

"Do you have to turn every simple interaction into a showdown?" he demands. "Because after three years it's getting pretty damn tiring."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Are you going to tell me why you pulled me into your office first thing in the morning for the second day in a row?"

"Well, before you decided to start fucking World War III, I was going to ask a simple question about how you liked your new partner, and out of respect for her, I didn't want to do it in the middle of the damned squad room."

"Well, aren't you quite crass this morning?" she remarks. "Are you sleeping well?"

"I could ask you the same question."

She meets his eyes with a glare and holds it until he turns away first, as he always does. "So, your partner, Detective Swan," he continues, pretending nothing happened, "is she satisfactory or do I need to start filing your transfer papers?"

"Trying to get rid of me, Lieutenant?"

"Yesterday, you said if she turned out to be an 'incompetent moron' - your words, not mine - that you wanted to transfer so you didn't have to 'put up with my bullshit' - again, your words. So I'll ask again: is she satisfactory?"

"You seemed satisfied enough with her work yesterday."

"I'm satisfied as long as our cases get solved; I'm asking you."

"You're the lieutenant, sir," Regina says sarcastically. "Who am I to question your opinions?"

"What the hell, Regina!" he growls. "Will you just put aside your ridiculous personal vendetta against me for *one fucking second* and answer the damned question so we can both get on with our days? My God, I never would have taken this fucking promotion if I'd known it was going to destroy our relationship like this."

"We never had a relationship," Regina mutters, just to be spiteful. If he's going to take liberties with the truth, she can, too; of course he would have taken the fucking promotion, regardless of her feelings. It's better pay and better hours and he's a single dad who should probably not be running around the streets all day at the considerable risk of making his son an orphan. She would have done the exact same thing in his position, minus telling him about it in bed. But, anyway, she's gotten a rise out of him, which is all she wanted, so she smiles sweetly and says, "My partner lacks experience but seems to be adjusting well enough. No

transfer will be necessary at the present time. Will that be all, Lieutenant Locksley?"

He runs a hand through his hair and looks so exhausted she almost feels badly for him, until she remembers being naked with him practically inside her and hearing him say that he was getting promoted to lieutenant - *her* lieutenant.

"Yes, Detective Mills, that will be all," he sighs.

"Have a nice day, sir."

Emma's second morning on the job can be described with just one word: slow. She supposes, in many ways, that's a good thing. It means people aren't getting murdered. However, it means she's stuck at her desk filling out paperwork and, since her new partner is to paperwork what her high school history teacher was to bibliographies, it's not exactly a walk in the park. Not to mention, the blazer she dug out of the back of her closet this morning is making her extremely uncomfortable. She misses her leather jacket.

"No, this is incorrect," Detective Mills says for the third time.

Emma is starting to get frustrated. "I double-checked everything on the form; it's all there," she insists, afraid that her voice is about to start turning into a whine.

"Yes, but the form itself is wrong. You filled it out correctly, but you were supposed to use-"

Emma doesn't hear the end of the sentence over the sound of her hand crumpling the sheet of paper she just worked so hard to fill out into a tight ball. She places it with the others on her desk in a pile that reminds her of ammunition for heavy artillery. Maybe with her next failure, she can make an origami cannon.

"Actually you can use same-" Nolan starts to say, but Mills silences him with a deadly glare. "Homicide paperwork can be confusing," he amends lamely. "You'll get the hang of it soon enough."

Mills rolls her eyes and mutters something under her breath about how anything is confusing when you're dimwitted, and Emma ducks her head in shame. Her plan to impress her new partner is not going very well. In fact, it's going very poorly. She's never been one for organization; reading people and thinking on her feet, yes, but nothing that involves minutiae.

"Mills!" Locksley calls, striding purposefully out of his office, "I need your files on the - Swan, what's going on? Are we having a paper snowball fight?"

"No, sir, it's just-"

"You need my files on what?" Regina interrupts, and Emma is torn between gratitude to her partner for saving her from the lieutenant's possible wrath (although he really doesn't seem like the kind of guy capable of feeling wrath) and embarrassment that such an act would even be necessary.

"The White case, what else?" Locksley sighs. "Commissioner wants to use it for one of those ridiculous experiential education panels at the academy, again."

"And they need my personal files?"

"Apparently so."

"You see," Regina says smugly, turning to Emma, "*this* is why it's important to keep meticulous records. You never know when someone will need the files ten years later to do...well, whatever it is they're trying to do now."

"They asked me if you'd join the panel as a featured speaker," Locksley mutters apologetically.

"About White? I assume you told them no."

"I didn't tell them anything; I figured you could do it much more colorfully yourself. Here's the number," the lieutenant says tiredly. "Do me a favor and don't say anything that will cost both of our jobs."

Mills rolls her eyes. "Wouldn't dream of it. Here's the file."

Locksley gingerly accepts the thick manila folder like it might explode in his hand. "Thanks. Maybe someday we'll be able to burn this and forget it ever happened."

"Wishful thinking," Regina snorts, her eyes cold and humorless. "Besides, why would I ever want to burn all the notes I worked so hard on? Speaking of which, Detective Swan, now that you've had an absurdly long break eavesdropping on my conversation with our superior officer, shall we discuss the importance of legible handwriting?"

Locksley, Jones, and Nolan all hide smirks as they retreat to their respective workstations, safely hidden from Mills's line of fire.

"Sorry," Emma mutters, fidgeting with a stray lock of hair. She hates feeling so incompetent; she obviously wasn't prepared for this promotion, and her new mentor seems to have very little patience for teaching rookies.

"Don't be sorry, be better," Mills scowls.

Emma bites her lower lip and grabs a new form, filling out the exact same information for possibly now the fifth time - she's losing track. She writes slowly, in painstakingly neat cursive, because for some reason her partner writes like a penmanship instructor from the Victorian Era. Her eyes dart frantically over the form one more time before she hands it to Mills, fingers crossed under her desk that this version will finally meet the older detective's satisfaction.

"This is acceptable," Mills says with a barely perceptible nod of approval, and Emma lets out a sigh of relief, visibly relaxing in her chair, because she finally did something right. "Now you just have fill it out in triplicate and do the same for the other witnesses."

Emma glances at her notes from yesterday and groans - she interviewed at least twenty witnesses. Her last department wasn't like this - she never had to actually talk to people or, for that matter, write things by hand. Still, she tells herself, this is better. She's making a difference and getting the most dangerous of criminals off the streets, keeping her hometown safe and secure. She's getting to work with Regina Mills and Robin Locksley, both of whom have been her idols since her early days in the academy.

They're absolutely nothing like she had imagined, but she chooses to let that go for now.

"So, Nolan," Jones is saying across the room, "did you ever make a decision regarding our talk last night?"

"Not an appropriate conversation topic for the workplace," Nolan mutters. "Ask me on lunch break."

"Come on, mate! She's stopping by in half an hour to meet about that Dorchester shooting suspect. Just ask her out. Whether she says yes or no, it'll put you out of your misery."

"I'm not asking her out *at work*," hisses the sandy-haired detective. "Are you insane?"

"Just do it. Swan, back me up here!" Jones calls out. "Tell him to just do it."

"As I said last night, I have no interest in Nolan's love life," Emma says with a nervous look at her glaring partner. "Leave me out of this."

"Are we in a police station or a middle school?" Mills demands angrily. "I can't seem to tell the difference right now."

Smirking, Nolan whispers, "Now you've done it," to Jones.

Emma inhales sharply as a completely enraged Regina Mills pushes herself up from her desk and storms over to the two male detectives, whose smiles have now been wiped from their faces. "You are creating a distraction that is preventing my partner and I from performing the duty we have sworn to fulfill, and I would greatly appreciate it if you discussed your idiotic schoolboy crush off the clock and out of my presence. Have I made myself clear?"

ADA Blanchard finally shows up for her meeting with Jones and Nolan, and Booth and Humbert have been called out on a case, leaving Regina alone with her new partner. She's actually quite impressed with Detective Swan's quick progress; it's only been one morning and her paperwork is already about ninety-five percent of the way to the senior detective's standards. It took a nearly a month to get Humbert up to this level, and Jones still wasn't there after six months when she finally refused to work with him anymore.

She magnanimously suggests they both break for lunch, and they're about to order paninis from the new place around the corner when Locksley comes out of his office again. He's changed into a suit and has a frazzled expression that makes Regina immediately drop the phone.

"Mills, I need you," he barks. "Preferably without flames coming out of your mouth because this situation is serious. I just got off the phone with Senator Billings's office."

"What's going on?" she asks, giving him her full attention. She may despise the man who doesn't deserve to be her boss, but not more than she respects the job. She lives for serious situations.

"He's dead," Robin says shortly.

Regina's eyes widen, and thoughts of lunch disappear completely from her mind. "Dead? How? A state Senator's been murdered?"

"Cause of death is unclear, but his home is already getting swarmed by press. The Commissioner wants me to go personally deal with it. And, of course, they want my best detectives, so..." his voice trails off and he gestures feebly at her.

"Of course." Regina stands and immediately grabs her coat. "Detective Swan, shall we?"

"I meant..." Locksley pulls her into his office and sighs. "I meant just you. Swan's a rookie; I need someone experienced in dealing with the press and high profile cases."

"Detective Swan is my partner, and she will assist with the investigation," she says firmly. "Or were you expecting me to take on this high profile case on my own?"

"I was going to get Nolan-"

"Swan is more competent and less irritating," Regina argues. She avoids mentioning that neither of those traits is particularly difficult to achieve - Nolan is marginally better than Jones, but not by much, and his self-righteousness loses him any advantage he may have had. She will *not* work with him.

The lieutenant raises his eyebrows in surprise. "You said yourself that she lacks experience."

"And how do you suggest she gain it? You and I didn't get where we are by being left at home while senior detectives did all the work. You wanted me to teach her; that's what I'm trying to do."

Locksley rubs his face tiredly. "I guess you're right," he concedes.

"There is no 'guess.' I'm right." She forcefully opens the door to his office and calls, "Swan! Are you ready?"

Dozens of reporters have already clustered in the deceased Senator's front yard when the detectives arrive. Locksley informs them that the Police Department has no comment on the death at the present time, and

the patrol officers working crowd control quickly let them into the pristine white mansion.

"Nice house," Swan mutters appreciatively.

"Detective Swan," Regina cuts in, "you will follow behind me and observe the proceedings. Try to refrain from making any comments - anything could be misinterpreted or leaked to reporters."

Emma dutifully stands off to the side and watches as Locksley discusses the body with Dr. Whale.

"Time of death was approximately three hours ago, judging by the state of the body," the Medical Examiner explains.

"And the cause?"

"That's the problem: there isn't one."

"What do you mean?" the lieutenant asks, brow furrowed in confusion.

"I mean, there's nothing to suggest that the death was unnatural," Whale says. "No injuries, nothing to suggest he was poisoned or suffered an

overdose of some kind, no signs of suffocation or anything like that."

"Okay, so why are we here?"

"Well, there's also nothing to suggest a natural death: no obvious signs of heart attack or stroke, and he's only about forty-five with no health problems. He was training to run the Boston Marathon in a few weeks. The wife wants me to do a full autopsy, and I might need to do one just to determine the cause of death."

"Then that's what you'll do," Locksley replies. "The press is all over this case already. We'll go over everything with a fine-toothed comb, even if it just confirms for the media and his wife that he died of natural causes."

Meanwhile, Regina is across the room, talking to the Senator's grieving widow.

"I was out shopping this morning," she weeps, "and when I came back - about an hour ago - he was just passed out on the couch. I thought he had just fallen asleep reading the newspaper, which he usually does if he doesn't have anywhere to be that day, but then I tried to wake him for lunch, and he was cold, and I called an ambulance but-" the woman's voice cracks and she breaks down sobbing in the detective's arms.

"Mrs. Billings, did your husband suffer from any health problems that you know of?" Regina asks gently.

"No!" the Senator's wife insists angrily, immediately straightening and wiping the tears from her eyes. "Your M.E. tried to insist it was a heart attack or something preposterous like that, but I told him: my husband was in perfectly good health. He's never been sick a day in his life! I want a full investigation - someone murdered my husband!"

"Yes, Mrs. Billings, Dr. Whale is going to do a full autopsy to help us determine the cause of your husband's death, but have you seen or heard anything unusual in the last few days to suggest that anyone may have wanted him dead?"

"His office receives death threats all the time! Fringe groups, crazy people - I kept telling him to hire a body guard, but he always refused." At that, she breaks down again.

"I see." Regina purses her lips and tries to suppress a sigh. "Maybe you can come down to the station to give a full statement, and we'll contact his office to look into these death threats. I assume they kept records of them?"

While her partner tries to coax the grief-stricken - and, Emma is starting to suspect, not completely sane - woman to return to the police station with her, Emma starts to take a look around the room. The Senator is laid out on the floor, his clothes and glasses a mess from paramedic's efforts to try to revive him. His newspaper is strewn across the carpet. Besides that, everything looks like she might expect it to in the living room of an insanely rich person who probably has a cleaning service come in several times a week.

One of the uniformed officers leads Mrs. Billings to a cruiser to return to the station, and Regina turns back to the crime scene and her partner. "See anything interesting, Swan?" she asks drily. "Or do you agree with Locksley that the death was natural and we're all making much ado about nothing?"

"Shakespeare?" the blonde comments, though it's obvious she's not really listening. She's approaching the newspaper that's lying in scattered sections in front of the couch. She's reaching out to -

"Gloves, Detective Swan!" Regina hisses urgently.

"Right," her partner looks sheepish for a moment before hurriedly asking a crime scene tech for a pair of gloves. As soon as her hands are safely covered, she picks up the front page.

"I knew I'd seen this story before," she muses. "Look!" she shoves the paper into Regina's face, and the older detective quickly skims the cover story about a power outage caused by the snowstorm...yesterday? "This is the *Globe* from, like, two months ago. I remember reading this on the train to New York."

Regina raises one eyebrow, impressed. "Good catch, Detective. So, now we have to ask ourselves, why would Senator Billings be reading a two-month-old issue of the *Boston Globe?*"

"He wouldn't," Emma says immediately. "He's a senator, so he should be pretty up-to-date on current events. Unless there was something important he wanted to remember - but why wouldn't he just use Google?"

"His wife says he was holding this newspaper when she found him," Regina says slowly. "Which tells us..."

"It was a set-up?" Emma guesses. "Or the wife's lying. She seemed a little off to me. Something about her body language..."

"Yes," Regina agrees. "Something was off about her. However, she was the one insisting on the full autopsy, which would make no sense if she had something to do with his death."

"Unless, she's crazy, or she set it up to frame someone else," Emma argues.

"We'll try not to use the word crazy," Regina gently scolds. "Until the cause of death has been determined, there are no suspects, and she is merely the victim's widow, whom we must treat with respect and compassion. But I like your instincts," she adds.

Emma's cheeks turn slightly pink, and Regina internally chides herself for giving away a compliment too soon.

"So what do we do now?" the rookie detective asks, clearing her throat. "I mean, while we're waiting to find out if there's an investigation or not."

"We return to the station and talk to the wife. Depending on what she says, we'll assess from there. I assume Dr. Whale is going to do the autopsy tomorrow morning. We should most likely try to be present for that."

"Watch the autopsy? Why?"

Because I don't trust Whale, Regina thinks. Aloud, she only says, "It helps to be more knowledgeable about what kinds of things we're looking for, especially in cases like this where the press is involved. It helps keep everyone on the same page."

"Cool," Emma says quietly. "I've never seen one before."

"The first one can be slightly...jarring," the older detective admits, "but you'll quickly get used to it. Unless you're Nolan."

Emma smirks. "You're really not his biggest fan, are you?" she observes.

"I don't know if you've noticed, dear, but I'm not really anyone's biggest fan. Now let's return to the station before we're forced to endure a press

conference. Lieutenant, I'm sure you can handle these friendly reporters on your own," she says to Locksley, an evil grin forming on her face.

He groans. "Are you and Swan going to get an official statement from the widow?"

"Yes, and we're going to ask her why her husband would have been reading a newspaper from two months ago," Regina says. "You can thank Detective Swan for catching that detail."

Emma is unsure how she manages to end up at the bar with the guys for the second night in a row. She's not a big drinker, and The Lion Flower has very little appeal if you're not looking to overload on either alcohol or grease. Still, she has to say she enjoys hanging out with her fellow detectives outside of work. She's always been a loner, pretty much keeping to herself with a few notable exceptions, but she's beginning to see that in this job, some kind of social support system is going to be necessary.

The wife hadn't given them any information; she'd just insisted repeatedly that someone had murdered her husband. Emma had tried not to roll her eyes, and Regina had given her the business card of a grief counselor and assured her that the autopsy would be done first thing in the morning.

"We're giving this case top priority," she'd said.

The detectives are pretty much evenly split about whether the Senator's death is suspicious, and Emma once again finds herself intimidated by the whole process. Investigating homicides *is* what she's always wanted to do, but she hadn't completely prepared herself for how deep and heavy these cases might turn out to be. She knows nothing about grief or loss, and she's especially unfamiliar with what might cause one person to kill another. Still, she supposes there's no point in dwelling on all of this now, and she forces her mind back to the here and now.

"It's inappropriate!" Nolan - or rather, *David* - exclaims. His partner is still harping on his cowardice for not asking their ADA out on a date.

"Come on, mate, she could turn out to be the love of your life."

"Or it could turn out horribly and you'll still have to work with her every day," Locksley warns. He has also invited Emma to call him by his first name, but she can't bring herself to do it just yet. "Getting together with coworkers is bad news."

"Ignore the cynic," says Killian, taking a generous gulp of his rum. "Besides, weren't you married to another cop?"

"Well, that turned out horribly in a different way," Locksley says sadly. "But Marian and I never actually worked together in the same unit."

"And Mary Margaret isn't even in the BPD!" Killian grins triumphantly. "You have no excuse."

"So what? I still see her at work at least once a week," David argues. "I have a closer working relationship with her than with any cop outside of our squad. I'm not asking her out."

"Suit yourself, mate, I'm just trying to help you find your eternal happiness," Killian says with a shrug. "Next round's on me!"

"So, Swan," Locksley says, "I see my detectives haven't scared you away yet. How are you liking our squad so far?"

"If her partner hasn't got her running for the hills, I'm not sure what can," David jokes, taking a small sip of his beer. "You're handling Mills like a champ."

"Regina is a lot to handle," Locksley concedes, "but you won't find a better mentor in any police department in the country."

"I know, sir," Emma says seriously, allowing her hero-worship to creep into her voice. "Working with her has been my dream since I was in the

academy. Actually, I think it's every female cop's dream."

"She's quite a good role model," Locksley agrees. "She's simultaneously the most cynical and the most idealistic person I've ever known," he explains with a kind of irritated fondness. "This job is her life, and even after everything she's been through, she still thinks she can change the world. She's got a passion that makes her an outstanding cop, and that's why I always have her train the rookies. That said, she hates most people, but you've obviously done something to impress her."

"Really?" Shocked, Emma thinks back to her past two days on the job and can't recall any instance where her new partner seemed especially impressed with her work; the newspaper thing wasn't a huge deal - Mills or Locksley probably would have figured it out in a few minutes even if she hadn't been there. She will admit that she hasn't received as much vitriol from Detective Mills as some of their other coworkers over the last two days, but she had assumed it was because she was new.

"Really," the lieutenant confirms with a vigorous nod. "For whatever reason, she seems to respect you, and her respect isn't the easiest to earn."

Emma shrugs. Killian has returned with the next round, and the conversation shifts toward the male detectives' weekend pursuits and away from Emma's partner, whom she finds harder to read than Elvish.

The group decides to call it a night when Emma has had enough to be nicely buzzed but not enough to feel the effects the next morning. She manages to catch the last subway home and drifts off to sleep much more easily than she did the night before. She's actually contributing to a high-profile homicide investigation, her lifelong hero might not think she's an idiot, and she gets to see Henry again in eight days that seem like they'll go by a lot quicker than she imagined.

Regina's alarm goes off at 4:45 after an almost completely sleepless night. Slightly dazed, she squints around her living room for a few moments before realizing where she is and fumbling for her phone to silence the blaring alarm before it wakes her neighbors. She glares at the device regretfully; she'd actually been having a good dream for once, but sometimes those are even worse than the nightmares when she awakens to the unpleasant fact that they're not real.

Quickly shaking the emotions from her head, she throws on a reflective jacket and quickly laces her sneakers for her morning run along the Charles River. This is her favorite time of day, just before the sun comes up, before there's anyone to put on a mask for, when she can lose herself to the pounding of her feet against the pavement and just forget. It's the one time she truly feels free. She never listens to music or requires any kind of distraction - running is the distraction.

She's been going for almost an hour, not paying much attention to her surroundings, when she crashes head-on into someone running in the opposite direction. She sputters in anger and confusion for a moment - Were they running on the wrong side? Was she? - before realizing who it is.

"Detective Swan!" Regina exclaims with a gasp.

"Detective Mills, hello," her new partner pants. "Sorry about that. I guess I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Don't worry about it, dear," she quickly reassures the younger woman, surprised at the words coming out of her own mouth."It was probably partially my fault. I tend to get a bit lost in thought while running."

"Yeah, me too," says Swan breathlessly, obviously relieved not to incur the older detective's wrath. "Do you run here often?"

"Every morning. And you?"

"Same. Well, as long as it's not icy. Then I go to the gym."

"I've never seen you out here before," the brunette observes.

"Likewise, but, you know, the path is pretty crowded."

Regina nods. "And, to be fair, I suppose I didn't know who you were before, so I wouldn't have known if I did see you."

"True. How far do you usually run?"

"Seven to ten miles, depending on how much time I have."

Emma whistles, impressed. "Damn, woman! And I was impressed with myself for doing three!"

"I have to stay in shape to keep up with all these twenty-something rookies like yourself that Locksley insists on bringing in," she explains with a slight roll of her eyes. The last thing she wants is to become a desk jockey - she'll leave the force before *that* happens.

"Yeah, well, you seem pretty in shape to me," the younger detective says, eyeing her body appreciatively. Regina tries to hide a smug smile.

"I do okay for an old lady," she says lightly.

"You're not an old lady," Emma protests. "You're...what? Like, thirty-seven?"

"Forty-three, but thank you."

"Wow, yeah, okay. I guess you are kind of an old lady," the blonde jokes. Grinning, she checks her watch. "Well, we should probably continue our workouts if we want to make it to work on time. You want to run together?"

"I run alone," Regina says quickly. "You wouldn't be able to keep up, anyway." With that, she takes off again.

"See you at the station!" Emma calls after her. Regina gives a small wave without turning her head, mentally calculating her timing. She'll have to turn around soon, and, thanks to Detective Swan's interruption, she won't make the full ten miles she had planned.

She normally hates leaving things unfinished, but nevertheless, she feels strangely satisfied at the end of her workout.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Warning: The last section of this chapter (it's all in italics; you can't miss it) contains actual and attempted murder and attempted heterosexual sex. It's 100% flashback, so if you absolutely don't want to read such things, you can skip to the last paragraph and still mostly understand the real-time plot.

"Hey there, kid," Emma says brightly. "How's your morning?"

"It's really good!" exclaims her always-energetic son. "Dad and I went to get bagels, and now we're walking to school. I only have a half-day today, so Jack and I might go biking in Central Park this afternoon."

Jack is...? Emma thinks to herself. Henry has way too many friends in New York; she can't keep track of all of them, especially from this distance. He was never so popular in Boston - always more interested in his books than human interaction. She wonders if it was her fault and he's better off without her.

"So, what are you doing today?" Henry asks.

"Well, I'm about to eat my own bagel, even though it's obviously not as good as yours, being from Boston and all."

"Obviously."

"And I just arrived at work. I get to watch an autopsy this morning."

"An autopsy?" She can almost see Henry's nose wrinkled in confusion through the phone. She wishes she could see it in person so she could poke it and giggle with him like they used to do when he still lived with her.

"Yeah, an autopsy," she explains. "It's like a surgery to find out how someone died."

"Oh. That sounds kind of cool, but also kind of gross."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Speaking of cool things, can we go to the aquarium when I'm in Boston next weekend? I heard there's a new penguin show."

"Of course," Emma promises. "We can do whatever you want - the whole weekend is yours. It's like your personal holiday: Henry Day."

"Awesome!"

"Yeah, anything special you want to do, just write it down and we'll try to fit in the whole list. I miss you so much, kid." She feels a stray tear springing to her eye and quickly wipes it away because she doesn't want to cry in the middle of the lobby at Boston Police Headquarters.

"I miss you, too," says Henry. "You could come live here, you know. You can transfer to the NYPD."

"I could," she muses. Or Neal could have transferred to any of the hundreds of Boston area IT companies that gave him offers instead of moving four hours away and taking their son with him, but she chooses to let that go for now. She's not going to badmouth Henry's other parent in front of him.

"By the way, Dad's right here. He wants to know if there's anything important you need to talk to him about...or just say hello."

"I suppose I could just say-" she starts to answer, but then she sees her partner down the hall, waving her toward the elevator. "On second thought, tell Dad I said hi and to email or text me later if anything comes up concerning you. I have to get to work."

"Okay, bye Mom. Love you!"

"Love you, too," she says, blowing a kiss through the phone as she approaches the elevator. "Have a great day!"

Detective Mills raises an eyebrow as Emma ends the call. "Your son, I assume," she comments.

"You assume right," Emma replies, stuffing a giant bite of bagel into her mouth. "So, is it time for the autopsy? Should we go?"

"You make it sound like a party," the senior detective remarks with a small smile. "And yes, we should go, but you should probably finish your breakfast first."

"Oh, right," Emma mumbles. "We're probably not allowed to bring food in the morgue, huh?"

"Actually, I've seen people do it before, but I find the practice quite disgusting, not to mention disrespectful."

"Yeah, I definitely wouldn't want someone stuffing their face over my dead body. I'll try to eat fast."

"Don't give yourself heartburn, dear. Whale rarely starts on time, anyway." The brunette gestures to the small travel mug in her hand and adds, "I'd also like to finish this coffee without scalding my tongue."

"Probably a good plan," agrees Emma. "I hate it when that happens and you can't taste anything for days."

"Indeed."

The two women finish breakfast and don scrubs before heading into the morgue, where Dr. Whale is waiting for them.

"The blood tests I sent to the lab yesterday came back negative for any common toxins," the Medical Examiner explains in place of a greeting.

"Have you checked for uncommon ones?"

"Next on my list, once I have a better idea of what kind of thing we might be looking for. I also ran a few scans last night that showed all of his organs were in good condition, apart from his being dead. The Senator was a healthy guy - only problem I can find at first glance is that his feet were in terrible condition. Completely covered with blisters, and he has a few missing toenails."

"He was training for a marathon," Mills points out.

Emma grimaces. "I'm guessing he didn't die from an infected blister?"

"Everything in his blood-work was relatively normal - no elevated white blood cell count that would indicate an infection," Whale reports, absentmindedly looking over his test results from the previous day.

"Detective Swan, any thoughts?" Mills asks, gesturing to the body.

"I...um..." Emma gulps. It's not like she's never seen a dead body, but she's certainly never been asked her thoughts on one before. And, quite frankly, she's never had any thoughts about a dead body besides, "Oh, that's sad." But Mills is expecting *something* from her, so she hesitantly approaches the autopsy table and says, "Whale's right. He looks like he's pretty healthy, except, you know, dead."

"Yes, dear," Mills says with a short laugh. "I believe that's why we're attending his autopsy."

Emma flushes crimson and continues, "His feet are definitely something else. I'm surprised he didn't have staph or something - those blisters do *not* look well cared for."

"Yes, for someone who was so invested in healthcare reform, he didn't do too much in terms of his own preventative care," the older detective observes, "but we've already established he didn't die from any infection."

Emma wrinkles her nose in disgust as she looks more closely - there's something weird just under his right ankle. Two tiny red dots that she almost missed.

"Hey, guys, what's that?"

Detective Mills, apparently not as disgusted by the victim's poor foot hygiene, leans in and squints at the marks. "That's odd - it looks like a set of two puncture wounds. That's not from running, unless he was sticking tacks in his shoes."

"Definitely not tacks," Whale mutters. "Size and shape are all wrong. I didn't notice these before with all the blisters. You've got a good eye, detective."

Whale takes out a ruler and starts measuring the odd markings. "Two small puncture wounds, about one and a half centimeters apart, nearly symmetrical in shape and size. We're looking for a sharp, slightly curved object, with two points."

"As a weapon?" Emma asks, brow furrowed in confusion. "Do you think this wound is related to how he died?"

"It's the most likely possibility we have at the moment," Whale replies. "So, yes, I think it bears further investigation."

"What would make a mark like that?" Mills wonders out loud. "That's not something we typically see."

"Sharp, curved...a hook?" Emma guesses. "A miniature dagger?"

"Fang marks," Regina informs Locksley smugly. "On the victim's right ankle. *Not* a natural death."

"Fangs?" Jones asks from his desk across the room. "As in, he was killed by a vampire?"

"No, genius," Swan scoffs, and Regina regards her young protégé proudly. "We're thinking more along the lines of a snake."

"Death by snakebite? Certainly makes more sense than *Twilight* suddenly coming to life," Locksley jokes. "I take it Whale found some kind of venom in his bloodstream?"

"He's testing it as we speak. The bite marks were only discovered this morning." She gives Swan a small nod of acknowledgment which Locksley immediately picks up on. He's known her long enough to know that she doesn't give credit where it's not due.

"Impressive. So, Regina, those transfer papers I had prepared for you, should I shred them?" he jokes.

"You're transferring? What's that supposed to mean?" Swan looks genuinely upset at the idea, and Regina feels her heart, or whatever it is that's in her chest nowadays, melting a little.

"Relax, dear," she says soothingly. "Sometimes our dimwitted lieutenant likes to have inside jokes with himself. You'll soon learn that it's best to simply not acknowledge him."

Locksley rolls his eyes and gets back to business. "So, can we officially state that he died from a snakebite? I've had the commissioner and the press crawling up my ass since last night - there were even reporters at Roland's daycare this morning."

"Whale can't make an official declaration until the blood tests come back, no," Regina says. "So, I suppose the press will be hounding you for a bit longer."

"Wait, they showed up at your kid's daycare?" Swan asks disbelievingly. "Are they for real?"

"Is Roland okay?" Regina demands. She loves the boy as much as she despises his father. "If they traumatized him too much, I'll take them out. I'm pretty sure most of the media thinks I'm unhinged enough they'd hardly be surprised if I went on a reporter killing spree."

Locksley snorts. "While I appreciate the offer, I think seeing a couple of reporters harass his father is less traumatizing overall than having to visit Auntie 'Gina in prison after she gets put away for manslaughter."

She's almost touched by implication that Roland would still get to visit her in prison, but she certainly won't admit that in front of Robin. It's bad enough that he saw her tears when the little boy made her a Mother's Day card last year.

"Anyway," the lieutenant continues, "is there any chance that this snakebite was some kind of random accident, like he was walking barefoot in his garden? Or are we leaning toward the homicide angle?"

"His feet were clean," Swan observes. "I mean...they were...there wasn't any soil on them."

Regina chuckles. "It did not appear that he had been walking barefoot outdoors. Whether the snakebite was an accident remains to be

determined. We'll refrain from speculation until Whale confirms what kind of snake it was."

Swan looks intrigued. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, if it's a snake commonly found in Massachusetts and active during this season, we would have no reason to suspect foul play. Even if he wasn't walking outside, he lives in an old house with a garden, outside of the city center, and something could have easily slithered inside. Now, if it's a rare snake..."

"You might think someone had set it on him? Like an attack dog or something...or an attack snake, I guess."

"This one catches on quickly," Locksley observes. "Definitely one of our more worthwhile hires."

"Yeah, well, I have a good teacher," Swan mumbles, flashing her partner a shy smile.

Regina doesn't hear whatever the moron says in reply, because suddenly her face feels about a million degrees and her heart is pounding so loudly it can probably be heard down the street and she thinks she hears wind rushing in her ears. What the hell is going on with her?

"Mills, are you sick?" Nolan asks, watching her tightly grip the back of her desk chair in order to stay upright.

"I'm fine, just a bit light-headed," she chokes out. "Low blood sugar or something."

Swan checks her watch and raises an eyebrow. "We were in that autopsy for a really long time. It's practically noon."

"Yes, Regina, why don't you take a lunch break?" Locksley suggests. "Maybe take Detective Swan with you? You can show her the good sub place at-"

"I will eat lunch where and with whom I see fit," Regina says coldly, angry that he would even think of trying to tell her what to do with her personal time and even angrier that he's looking at her so *knowingly* when she doesn't even know what there is to be knowing about. "But, Detective Swan, you are welcome to join me if you wish."

"I, um...actually brought my own lunch," the younger detective says hesitantly, looking back and forth between her partner and lieutenant like she has no idea what just happened. "But thanks for the offer."

Regina is about three and a half miles into her morning run when she feels someone approaching quickly from behind. She moves slightly aside to let whoever it is pass, but instead the person comes up beside her and starts running at the same pace.

"Hey," says the breathy voice of Emma Swan, just over her left shoulder. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Good morning, Detective Swan," Regina grumbles, glad she stopped herself from throwing the elbow strike she was considering. "To what do I owe the pleasure of you disturbing my morning run, again?"

"Oh, I was just out here, and I saw you, and I thought I'd try to catch up. You know, say hello and all that. Plus, Officer Lucas - have you met her? - she wants to get a bunch of us to sign up for the New York City Marathon in the fall, to raise money for the Canine Officers Fund, and I thought, maybe, I should start running more miles to see if I can do it, and I was wondering if-"

"You could run with me?" Regina interrupts. *Absolutely not*, she wants to say.

"You seem to have a much higher average mileage than I do," Emma admits with a small laugh. "I thought if I could tag along, have someone to pace me...I won't bother you or mess up your stride or anything, I promise."

"I prefer to run without company," Regina says. Or, at least that's what she thinks she says. What she actually says is, "That would be fine, Detective Swan." Apparently, her brain and mouth are operating on two different planes.

"Wait, really?" the blonde gasps, looking about as surprised as Regina feels.

She wants to take it back, but she doesn't. Instead she says, "But I won't wait for you if you can't keep up, or follow you if you run ahead. And don't speak to me unless it's an emergency."

"I can handle that," the younger detective agrees, falling into step a few feet behind her mentor. And, evidently, she can, because she's so quiet Regina almost forgets that she's there until she turns around at her halfway point and sees that Emma is still right behind her. She's breathing heavily, but showing no sign of slowing down.

"Is this pace okay for you?" Regina asks.

"If I said it wasn't, would that change anything?"

"No, probably not."

"Then the pace is fine."

The two women run the remaining five miles in silence. Regina is slightly worried her partner won't be able to keep up with her for the entire distance, but every time she turns around, she sees the messy blonde curls bobbing along just a few steps back.

"I usually stop here," Regina says, slowly tapering off the pace at the turn-off to her apartment. "It's five miles each way, ten total," she offers as an explanation, "though you only did about six and a half of them."

"That's plenty for now," Emma pants. "I'm going to be so sore later. And I don't want all my toenails to fall off like Senator Billings."

"Keep moving so you can bring your heart rate down gradually," Regina orders, slowly pacing back and forth on the side of the trail to get her own breathing under control. "Then we'll stretch."

"You sure know a lot about running," the younger woman remarks. "Has it always been one of your hobbies?"

Regina shrugs. "I suppose so. I started way back in high school, and only miss a morning if I'm sick or injured or there's some monumental disaster going on." Truthfully, she wouldn't even consider running a hobby; it's like food or water or air for her soul, and she'd probably suffer some kind of breakdown if she couldn't do it. But it's way too soon to admit something like that to a coworker she's known for less than a week.

She leads Detective Swan through a few simple stretches - she sees some runners doing insanely complex routines, but she's always believed less is more - and instructs her to stay hydrated throughout the day and eat a bit of protein for muscle recovery.

"This was fun," her partner says. "Can we do it again?"

"I start from this spot at five A.M. every day," she informs the rookie detective. "If you would like to tag along, well, it's a public trail. I certainly can't do anything to stop you."

Emma grins. "I'll be here, ready to work my ass off," she promises. "But now I should probably get going so I can shower before work. Wouldn't want to stink up the squad room."

"Believe me, dear, your stench is nothing compared what that squad room has seen in the past. Nevertheless, a shower is probably good idea."

"Yeah, I think so. See you in an hour."

"Goodbye, Detective Swan."

"It's Emma. I mean, if we're going to be running buddies, you can probably start calling me by my first name."

"I would hardly call us 'buddies,'" Regina argues, "but if that's what you prefer, then, goodbye, Emma."

As she jogs back to her apartment at cool-down pace, Regina feels the corners of her lips turn upwards in a private little smile.

"The Agrabahn Viper?" Emma groans. "What the hell is that?"

"According to Google, it's an extremely venomous snake that originates in the Arabian Peninsula," Mills replies without looking up from her computer. "It's quite rare and quite deadly - its bite can kill almost instantly."

"I'm guessing that's not a variety of snake that might have crawled in from the garden?"

"Seems unlikely. And, in case you're wondering, I already asked: the Billings family did not keep an Agrabahn Viper, or any kind of snake, as a pet."

"I always wanted a pet snake," Emma remarks absently, remembering all the pets she's wanted but never had over the years. "But not one that would kill me instantly."

"A wise choice," Mills agrees. "Now, he was found dead in his living room, on the sofa-"

"*If* his wife was telling the truth," Emma interrupts. She still doesn't trust the woman - there was something very off about her, even after only a few minutes of observation.

"If the wife was lying, then she's not the only one involved, because she's fit enough but she's too small to have carried him very far by herself, and the EMTs reported that he was on that sofa."

"She mentioned he had gotten a bunch of death-threats, right? Maybe we should check those out; I mean, I still think the wife is suspicious as hell, but-"

"But we should probably cover our all our bases instead of immediately accusing the grieving widow of murder? I concur."

The rest of the day is spent contacting the Senator's associates to gauge how many people might have wanted him dead (answer: very few) and locating breeders of rare snakes in the Greater Boston area to determine

where the viper may have come from. It seems like they're hitting dead end after dead end, and Emma is starting to get frustrated, but Mills assures her this is perfectly normal.

Locksley comes out of his office in the early evening, looking exhausted and annoyed. "I just got a call from the governor, inquiring about our investigation on Senator Billings's death," he says with a loud groan. "Please tell me you at least have *something*."

"Well, we're pretty sure it wasn't politically based. Detective Swan, would you care to explain?"

"His office gave me copies of the death threats against him. There were only about three, and the last one was over six months ago."

"Which tells us...?" Mills coaxes.

"Well, it actually tells us very little, but it's unlikely that someone would have killed him for political reasons without mentioning it first. And it tells us that the wife lied, because she said he received death threats all the time."

Mills nods approvingly. "Detective Swan and I both suspect the wife is somehow involved, but we can't establish motive, or any solid evidence linking her to the snake."

"And there's no chance this rare viper somehow got loose from a zoo or something and got into the house on its own?" Locksley asks with a sigh.

"Seems highly unlikely, sir," Emma reports. "We contacted all the zoos and snake breeders within a twenty-mile radius, and no one's had an Agrabahn viper go missing."

"So, we still don't know where the snake came from, or where it is now," Mills adds with a shudder.

"Wonderful." Locksley sighs again. "Now I get to tell reporters that we not only have a murdered Senator, but a deadly snake possibly on the loose. And here I was hoping you were going to tell me his death was a freak accident and we could put this all behind us."

"Oh, so now you want to let a murderer run free because it's convenient for you?" Mills demands furiously, her good humor of just moments ago completely forgotten. Emma is confused - she doesn't remember him saying that at all. "Because it keeps the press off your back? You always said going brass wasn't going to change you, Robin. What happened?"

"I never said I wanted to let a murderer run free!" he exclaims. "Stop twisting my words. I can wish that the death was accidental even though I know it's not true!"

"Why would you waste time wishing for things you know you can't have?"

"What do you want me to say, Regina? That I'm glad a politician was probably murdered, potentially by his wife? That I enjoy being hounded by reporters twenty-four seven about things entirely outside of my control? Because I'm not."

"I don't want you to say anything! I want you to accept that you can't always fix things!"

Emma's eyes dart back and forth between Mills and Lockley, and she wonders if they're even talking about the case anymore.

Nolan clears his throat. "Hello, Mary Margaret," he says loudly to ADA Blanchard, who has just entered the squad room.

"David, Killian, Regina, Robin, hi," the new arrival says awkwardly. "Oh, and Emma! Nice to see you again."

"Hello, Miss Blanchard," Regina says calmly. "Lieutenant, have you finished venting your frustrations? Or were you unaware when you took this job that you might have less than enjoyable interactions with reporters?"

"I'll be in my office," the lieutenant says shortly. "Let me know if you get anything from Whale."

"David, are you ready to go over your testimony for the Harrison trial?" Blanchard asks.

"Yeah, let's get out of here," he says quickly, leading her into a conference room.

Jones smirks. "Testimony, my ass. All he has to say is that he found the gun in the Harrison's apartment and he had a legal search warrant. If they're still in there after five minutes, I'll bet twenty bucks that they're actually making out."

"You know, not everyone is as immature as you," Emma says tiredly. She sometimes wonders how the rum-swilling detective manages to hold down a job at all, especially one as demanding as theirs. "Some of us actually take our jobs and lives seriously."

"But I have more fun than them," Jones points out. "Look at Mills - she's probably going to drop dead of a heart attack before fifty."

"I assume you are aware of the fact that I can hear you?" asks the senior detective. "And that you're going to drop dead of liver cirrhosis by forty?"

Jones gives a good-natured shrug. "At least I'll die happy. Unlike you - you need to get out more. When's the last time you had some action?"

Mills's eyes darken and the glare she gives Jones makes Emma shiver in her seat. "Even if such a thing were any of your business, that is a wildly inappropriate question for the workplace, and I could very easily bring you up on harassment charges. Now, get back to work."

Jones shrugs again and turns back to his computer screen.

"What do we do now?" Emma asks quietly. "There's not much, is there?"

"No, there's not," Mills sighs. "Maybe...it's a long-shot, but let's try to see if there's anything on public record about him or his wife - disputes, domestic violence, tax problems, anything. We can't get a search warrant without more evidence or at least a motive."

"Right."

An hour later, their searches come back fruitless. The Senator and his wife are model citizens; neither one has so much as a parking ticket. "This is absurd," Emma mutters. "This couple is too good to be true. Did you find anything?"

"Senator and Mrs. Billings give generously to several charitable organizations and volunteer at soup kitchens in their spare time," Mills

reads in a monotone. "This has been a waste of time, and I'm sorry for suggesting it. Let's call it a night."

Emma quickly checks her watch: it's already almost nine. She can't believe they're working such long hours already, but it's hard to imagine going home without any solid leads on the dead Senator and the lieutenant on the warpath. "Is Locksley going to be pissed?" she asks hesitantly.

"He's already angry at the world, but he's always been big on people getting enough sleep. He'll probably leave soon himself - he likes to get home in time to tuck his son in," Mills explains. Emma feels the sharp sting of jealousy in her gut; she wants to tuck her son into bed at night. *One more week*, she reminds herself.

"Hey, Mary Margaret and I were going to head to the Lion Flower for dinner and a drink, if you guys want to join," Nolan offers.

Jones excitedly claps a hand on his partner's back. "Alright, mate! You finally asked her out!"

"It's not a date," mumbles Nolan. "Just a friendly dinner between coworkers, or I wouldn't have asked you to join."

"Just a tip," Emma says jokingly, "if you *are* going to take a woman out, you should probably pick somewhere a little nicer than that dirty bar."

"What's wrong with the Lion Flower?" Jones asks - Emma can't tell whether his offense is real or fake.

"Nothing is wrong with the Lion Flower," she quickly placates him. "It's just...most ladies, when picturing their ideal romantic evening, aren't picturing a dive bar full of cops where their only menu choices are a cheeseburger or bacon cheeseburger."

"There are also chicken wings!"

"There's also a reason you're still single."

"Then why don't you help me fix that? Let me take you to dinner tonight, somewhere you like, and you can show me what a lady pictures as her 'ideal romantic evening.'"

Emma laughs and rolls her eyes. "Okay, first of all, my ideal romantic evening doesn't include you, so there's that problem. But I will go to the bar with you guys because I'm starving and a burger sounds awesome right about now. Just let me finish up this stuff on the computer, and I'll be right there."

"Great, it can be a double date!"

"It's not a date," Emma and Nolan growl at the same time.

Regina watches the interaction between her partner and Detective Jones with narrowed eyes, unable to shake uneasy feeling she has about the situation. Of course, she's known Jones for a long time now, and inappropriate flirting is just what he does. But is Emma flirting back?

She knows the thought shouldn't bother her the way it does; a little bit of flirting doesn't mean that Emma is going to make the same mistakes she did. It's probably nothing. She's freaking out over nothing and Emma will be fine.

She's not going to say anything.

"Be careful who you get into bed with, Detective Swan," she says, completely emotionlessly and without looking up from her computer screen. There's her mouth refusing to do what her brain tells it, yet again.

"Excuse me?"

The younger detective sounds pissed, which Regina supposes she understands, because if there's one thing she's noticed successful female cops have in common, it's a strong aversion to being told what to do, and she, herself, would never accepted taken such a suggestion kindly.

"Just some friendly advice," she clarifies. "Ignore it, if you want." *At your own peril,* she adds internally.

"I'm not getting into bed with anyone," her partner snaps.

"I'm not judging you," Regina explains quickly. "Trust me, I know how it gets. This job is tough, it's isolating, and sometimes you have to let off some steam, and it's easier to do that with someone you know and trust instead of some stranger you met in a bar. It's just-"

"So, what?" demands Emma. "You think I want to 'let off some steam' with Detective Jones?"

"I wouldn't claim to know what *you* want, but I know him. And I'm not going to tell you what to do, I'm just suggesting that you think carefully about the possible repercussions of any decisions you make, preferably before the clothes come off."

"I know all about repercussions from casual sex, and I don't get involved with coworkers."

Regina sighs. This is going about as well as she should have expected.

"Well, then," she says, trying her best to keep her voice detached, "it seems you're more intelligent than about ninety percent of our department, and I'll avoid giving you any further unsolicited advice."

Her partner's face softens slightly. "Look, it's not that I don't appreciate your advice," she backtracks. "Really, I admire you and your work, and I've always wanted to learn from you. It's just...I'm almost thirty. I have a kid. I can manage my own personal life."

"Of course," Regina murmurs, running one hand exhaustedly through her hair. Why the hell did she think this conversation was a good idea to begin with? She doesn't even remember; all she knows is that the thought of Emma Swan and Killian Jones together in any way makes her sick to her stomach.

She knows it's not fair. She knows that she has no right to any opinion on the matter, that Emma is an adult perfectly capable of making her own decisions, that she doesn't need someone to protect her from the consequences of her actions, and even if she did, it wouldn't be Regina's place to do so. God, she needs to get some sleep. Her head feels like it's about to split in two.

"Hey, do you want to come?" Emma suddenly asks.

"Come to the bar?" Regina is shocked - she hasn't been explicitly invited anywhere since she and Locksley stopped being friends. "I don't think so."

"Not a huge fan of cheap beer and greasy burgers?" the blonde asks jokingly.

"I do enjoy the occasional beer and burger binge," Regina admits, "but I'm not a fan of keeping unnecessary company with idiots, especially when I already have a headache."

"Hey, now," Detective Swan protests, hands on her hips in feigned annoyance. "I resemble that remark."

"Not you, dear," Regina quickly corrects, gesturing carelessly at Jones and Nolan, who are pretending to duel with their pencils on the other side of the room while waiting for Swan to join them.

Emma hides a snicker behind one hand. "Right. Well, goodnight, Detective Mills."

"Regina."

"Pardon?"

"If I'm supposed to call you Emma, then you can probably call me by my first name, too. Just...don't let anyone hear you. I wouldn't want to encourage excessive familiarity - I do have a reputation to uphold."

"Of course," Emma says with a warm smile. "Goodnight, Regina. See you bright and early tomorrow morning?"

"See to it that you're ready to go; I won't wait for you. And goodnight, Emma," she adds softly.

Swan follows the two dimwits out of the squad room with a friendly wave, and Regina glances to her right to see Locksley raising one eyebrow at her, his expression inscrutable. She flashes him her best glare before shutting down her computer and stalking out the door without a farewell.

She's been on her couch for an hour, nursing her second whiskey and mindlessly watching *Friends* reruns, when her phone buzzes with a text from her partner.

She squints to see the small picture - an old and matted teddy bear resting on top of a checkered pillowcase - and read the message accompanying it: *Tonight's bedmate - I hope you approve.*

Maybe it's because she's been drinking and maybe it's because she's just so tired she finds almost anything amusing, but Regina feels a loud, genuine laugh erupt from the pit of her stomach. For the first time in ages, she falls asleep with a smile on her face. Unfortunately, her dreams don't let her keep it there for long.

Regina is curled on the couch in the break room, unable to bear the thought of opening the door to her dark apartment. Eight years. It was eight years ago today, but sometimes it feels like only five minutes ago. She's half-asleep, one hand resting protectively across her abdomen, though there's nothing in there worth protecting anymore - White made sure of that. Still, if she imagines hard enough, she can still feel the tiny flutters in her belly and Daniel's strong but gentle arms wrapped around her.

But if she imagines too hard, she feels the cool metal knife against her throat and the warm blood spilling out of both their bodies as his turns cold against hers, and she can hear the sound of her gun going off and her screams fading into silence as the world slowly goes black.

"You sleeping here tonight?" a voice asks from the doorway. Her heart nearly stops beating for a moment as she jumps up, reaching for her gun. Then the light flickers on, and it's Locksley.

It's just Locksley.

"I could have shot you," she angrily scolds her partner. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that!"

"I'm sorry," he says sincerely, with the same sad puppy expression that's been on his face since his wife died. "I didn't think."

"You never do, dear. And yes, I am sleeping here. What are you doing?"

"Roland is at Marian's parents' house tonight," he explains. "I've been putting off going home - the house is just too quiet without him. It gets lonely."

Lonely. Regina understands. She knows the feeling well.

"Want to sit and talk?" she offers, beckoning him to join her on the couch. "I doubt I'll be falling asleep anytime soon."

Robin nods gratefully. "Nightmares?" he asks, sitting down gently beside her.

She sighs. "Always." He's one of the few people who knows. They've been partners for eight years, since she got back from her medical leave, and friends for even longer. They were an inseparable foursome in their early days at the academy: Robin and Marian and Daniel and Regina. She's spent many a night over the years fighting her nightmares on the Locksleys' guest bed. He knows everything. He knows far too much.

"He's locked up, remember? You put him there. He can't hurt you anymore."

"I know," she whispers, but it's not true. It's not even remotely true because even if White isn't actively hurting her right now, he took away everything that mattered to her, and it hurts every second of every day. And he knows that, too, and he knows his words won't placate her, but he says them anyway because he has this insatiable need to fix everything and make her better, and sometimes she likes to pretend it's working. She's not sure whether it's for his benefit or her own.

"It doesn't go away, does it?" he asks. "The pain, I mean?" His eyes have a far-off quality about them and she knows he's thinking about Marian. He's always thinking about Marian; hell, Regina *sometimes thinks about Marian, and how cruel and ironic it is that a woman who spent over a decade putting her life on the line every single day to bust drug dealers was taken out of the world by a car crash on her way to the supermarket a mile from her house. How tragic it is that little Roland lost his mother before he was even old enough to form solid memories of her. That Robin lost the love of his life just as she did. That she lost one of her two friends.*

"The pain fades, somewhat, but the loneliness...the loneliness only gets worse," she admits, telling him the truth because she cares for him too much to let him waste time and energy on false hope, and because they're partners and they have each other's backs, and she trusts him with her whole soul as he does her.

And right now, her soul feels empty and hollow, and there's a dull ache in her chest where maybe her heart should be, but she doesn't even remember anymore how she's supposed to feel because the loneliness has taken over every other emotion.

Robin leans in and wraps an arm around her shoulders, and she tenses at first because there's something that feels so very wrong about it, but there's also something that feels strangely, unbelievably right*, and she feels herself leaning into him and resting her head against his chest.*

"We make quite the pair," he jokes, and for some reason her body is reacting before her mind does, and she's kissing him. He pulls away for a moment, looking shocked, and then suddenly he's kissing her back, and she has him practically pinned against the sofa and his arms are around her and she doesn't even know what's happening.

She hasn't been kissed, not since Daniel. She hasn't been held like this since Daniel, either. But it's not like Daniel, she thinks. This isn't love. This is - well, she doesn't know what it is, but she knows that it's something she needs, desperately, and she thinks he needs it, too.

He moans beneath her, and his mouth pulls away from hers, and a shiver runs through her body as she feels his calloused fingers brush against her skin, unbuttoning her pants and sliding them gently over her hips, and her hands are doing the same to his. She laughs as their limbs get tangled up in all the clothes they're rushing to take off, and the sound feels foreign coming from her throat.

He hesitates at the buttons of her shirt. "Is this okay?" he rasps.

"Yeah." The word comes out of her mouth unbidden, before she even has time to think, and it's more like a sudden exhalation than a word at all. She hasn't let anyone see her shirtless in seven years - hasn't let anyone see the scars from White's attempt to cut her unborn child out of her womb. There's part of her that wants to take it back, but a much bigger part that says she's been so lonely for so long and if she's going to let someone in, she might as well let them all the way in. "Let's take it off."

Without further delay, they are both divested of their remaining clothing, and Regina is the one with her back against the couch cushions. Robin is leaning over her, straddling her hips, and her breath catches in her throat as he hovers a finger over the thick, raised white lines that crisscross her stomach.

"Would it make you uncomfortable if I-"

"Yes."

"Okay, then I won't," he says quietly, raising his hand to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear instead. "Regina, are we really doing this?"

"It appears that we are," she says breathlessly, pulling him down by the shoulders into another kiss, and somewhere in the back of her mind where she keeps rational thoughts instead of hormones and loneliness, she thinks that maybe this is a terrible idea; at best, she'll never be able to sit on this couch again, and at worst, well...

But then he *pulls away.*

Regina blinks rapidly in utter confusion and reaches down to cover herself with her hands as much as she can. The first thought to cross her mind is that he was so disgusted by her scars that he doesn't want her anymore, but a quick look down confirms that's not the problem. Then she thinks of Marian and how she's only been gone for eleven months. If he thinks this - whatever it is - is disrespecting his wife's memory, then she supposes her brain understands even if the wetness between her legs doesn't. She knows Marian, and she knows Marian wouldn't have minded, but it's been less than a year, so she understands.

"Regina, there's something I haven't told you," he says hesitantly. "It's...I don't feel comfortable doing this is if you don't know."

"Okay, then tell me," she demands, pulling herself into a sitting position and draping his discarded shirt over her midsection. "What

is it? You don't have herpes or something, do you?"

"What? No, nothing like that. It's just - I put in papers for a promotion. I need to do something more regular. For Roland, you know. Ride a desk or something."

"Oh." She blinks again, wondering if she missed something."That's all?"

"I got it."

"Oh...I - that's great, Robin. Congratulations," she says sincerely. If she's honest with herself, it hurts like hell that he's being promoted when she's been passed up several times (but the brass has always hated her, so it's no surprise), and that she won't have her partner of seven years anymore, but she really is happy for him. And she still doesn't see what the problem is.

"They're making me a lieutenant," he continues. "I'm taking Midas's job in two weeks when he retires."

"You're...Midas..." the thoughts all suddenly piece together in her mind and a cry of shock comes from deep in her chest before she can hold it in. He's not just *getting promoted; he's going to be her boss. She feels like she's been punched in the gut - no, stabbed, and she knows what that feels like - and her clothes can't get back on her body fast enough. "Get out," she hisses.*

"Regina, I'm-"

"Get away from me!" she practically yells, fumbling desperately with the zipper on her pants. Her underwear has somehow disappeared, and she knows she needs to find it before someone else does tomorrow morning, but she doesn't have the presence of mind to look and her vision is clouded with red, anyway. "I can't see you right now!"

"Okay, okay," he says, terrified, raising a hand in conciliation like she's a wild dog preparing to attack him, which she supposes is how she probably seems right now. "I'm sorry, Regina. I should've-"

"This never happened," she growls, getting right up in his face. "Do you understand me? Tonight didn't happen. You will wipe it from your memory and tell no one."

"Regina," he says desperately, "it doesn't change how I-"

"Don't," she snaps, pulling on her shirt inside-out and storming from the room. "And don't be here when I come back."

She can barely see in front of her and she certainly isn't thinking straight, but somehow her feet lead her to the women's locker room in the basement gym, and she rips her clothes off for the second time that night before turning on the shower at full blast.

As the scalding hot droplets pelt her body, she collapses against the wall and allows the sobs she's been holding back to finally escape, and she's shaking and her chest is heaving with anger and embarrassment, and she beats her fists repeatedly against steamy tile and screams because she hates him and she hates herself and she doesn't even understand what's happening to her mind and body and soul except that it hurts. It's a sharp, searing pain that feels like it's about to rip her in two, and it's so overwhelming that she can't even stay upright anymore. Her knees buckle and she sinks down into the fetal position.

She's not sure how long she lies there, crying on the grimy, disgusting floor, but the water raining down on her gradually grows colder, and the red-hot rage filling her body is slowly overtaken by an a dark, icy pit of loneliness, and the only feeling remaining is the dull ache in her hands from their contact with the shower wall, but at least she's feeling something. She finally gets up and laces her sneakers while it's still dark outside - she's pretty sure she runs close to eighteen miles before the sun even comes up.

In the morning, Robin brings her coffee and carefully doesn't comment on her bruised fingers or the dark circles under her eyes, and she pretends not to notice that he's hungover and hasn't showered, and they both start the process of trying to forget the night they each lost their best friend for the second time.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Trigger Warning for attempted suicide in the second flashback scene (again, all it's all in italics - you can't miss it). If you want to skip that, you won't miss too much that's relevant to the real-time plot.

The Lion Flower grows less and less interesting with repeated visits, Emma determines as she absentmindedly swirls a French fry in the giant pool of ketchup on her plate. She's already won at pool, lost miserably at darts, and tried all three of the burger variations (bacon cheese is the best by far). And now, she's beyond bored watching David and Killian's drunken attempts at flirtation.

"How are you liking the transfer to homicide so far?" ADA Blanchard asks her, pretending to listen to a slightly tipsy David's rendition of the Foundations' "Baby, Now That I've Found You."

"Oh, you know, it's-"

"Are you ladies ready to experience your ideal romantic evening?" Killian slurs, already much deeper into the rum than any of his drinking companions, "because Swan says-"

Red-faced, David wrestles his partner out of the way. "Excuse him," he says authoritatively. "Take your time eating - Killian is just a little excited for our first weekend in a month not being on call."

"A month?" Emma exclaims. "How'd you get stuck with that?"

"Locksley seems to think that free time isn't our friend," Nolan grumbles.

Mary Margaret smirks and takes a small, dignified sip of her drink. "Wonder why?" she jokes, gesturing to his partner, who is practically climbing onto the bar.

"Come on, mate, you're still too tense. A little more liquid courage to woo your lady friend." Jones wiggles his eyebrows suggestively at David. "Another round of your finest rum, good sir!" he calls to the amused bartender.

"No, I'm cutting both of you off," says Mary Margaret. "Or you're going to spend your hard-earned weekend off with splitting headaches."

Emma laughs when both men flash the ADA their best puppy-dog eyes like a couple of scolded children. "I might actually bow out early," she says, checking her watch. "Unlike you, I *am* on call this weekend because of the Senator case, and I've got to get up at the crack of dawn

to go running with Regina." This is her chance to really get to know one of her heroes, perhaps even become her friend. She doesn't want to screw it up.

At the mention of her partner's name, Mary Margaret almost spits out her drink, and both of the male detectives instantly sober.

"Regina?" the ADA asks, voice squeaking. "As in, Detective Mills?"

Emma chuckles. "The one and only," she says proudly. She'd be lying if she said she didn't enjoy holding the distinction of being the only coworker the senior detective actually likes.

"You're going running with the Evil Queen?" demands Killian. "I need more rum."

"The Evil Queen?" Emma asks, cocking her head in confusion. "I haven't heard that one before."

"We were going to save it for when you were a bit less impressionable," David explains. He glares at his partner, and Killian shrugs and takes a swig of his newly refreshed drink.

"She's a bit of a hardass," the rookie detective agrees reluctantly, "but evil seems like a stretch."

"It's sexism, pure and simple," Mary Margaret declares. "Women in positions of authority are held to a different standard than men. That said, Detective Mills is...well, she's a bit special."

"She's no fun," Killian whines. "And neither are you. Come on, Swan, one dance before you go?" He grabs Emma's hand and attempts to twirl her around, but ends up crashing into a barstool and spilling his drink.

"I don't dance," Emma says, laughing. "And apparently, you don't, either. Might want a little more practice before you try to woo the ladies, mate."

"Yes," agrees Mary Margaret with a mischievous grin. "I'm sure David could use the practice as well, for our next 'double date.'"

"The lady has spoken!" Killian cries. "Come on, mate!" He drags a sputtering Detective Nolan onto the dance floor, tripping over various other patrons' feet and generally making a scene.

Mary Margaret snickers and pulls out her phone. "I'll send you the video," she promises. "Now, go get some sleep so you can keep up with Her Majesty tomorrow."

"You sure you've got this?" Emma asks guiltily, gesturing to their clumsy, inebriated companions on the dance floor. She doesn't want to

leave Mary Margaret alone to manage the behavior to two drunk dudes on her own, but she does have to go.

"I've got this," Mary Margaret reiterates, pressing the record button as Killian starts pulling David onto a table, both men belting out the first verse of "Don't Stop Believing." "And soon, a lot of other people will have it, too," she cackles.

Emma takes great pride in the fact that she's ready and waiting, stretching off to the side of the trail, when Regina arrives for their run. She's not sure she's ever woken up this early on a Saturday before, at least not since Henry was a toddler. "Good morning, running buddy!" she says brightly.

Her partner grunts incoherently at her.

"Not much of a morning person?" she guesses. Another grunt. "Not a people person?"

"Let's just run, Detective Swan," Regina snaps.

Emma's brow furrows in confusion. "We're back to Detective Swan now?" she asks, mostly to herself. She wonders what the hell she did to bring on this abrupt change in attitude - she remembers them parting on fairly good terms the night before. But she's afraid to ask, and Regina - Detective Mills? - is already running, so she just shrugs and follows.

The first four miles pass silently and pleasantly enough, except for the turmoil in her head about why her partner suddenly hates her. They fall into a comfortable rhythm together; Emma is able to match Regina's pace with a slightly longer but slower stride.

It's all going well until she develops a cramp in her right calf that starts off fairly innocently but quickly turns into something more painful, and she grits her teeth and tries to push through it because the last thing she wants to do is piss off an already pissy Regina Mills, but the older detective seems to immediately sense that something is off.

"Leg pain?" she asks, slowing her stride slightly so she can turn her head back towards her partner.

"Yeah, just a cramp. Don't worry about it," Emma groans, limping slowly forward.

"Let's get off the trail," Regina suggests. "You can stretch it out. Walk it off and take a lot of deep breaths. Day two of getting back in shape is always the hardest."

Emma winces as she tries to loosen the muscle. "You can just go on without me. I don't want to ruin your run," she says sadly.

Regina doesn't respond. Instead, she coaches Emma to rotate her ankle in small circles. "If that doesn't work, you can try massaging it. I find the knuckles work very well for such purposes."

"Do you have a lot of experience with this?" Emma asks, gasping in pain.

"I've been running for over twenty-five years," Regina points out. "Here, let me help." She kneels on the ground next to Emma and starts massaging her leg. "It hurts around here, right?" Emma responds with a loud yelp as her partner's knuckles find the precise location of the cramp.

Is this weird? she thinks to herself, watching the older woman in confusion. But she shrugs and decides not to question it, because her calf is starting to loosen.

"Thanks," she says breathlessly. "I think I'm all better now."

"I've been told I have magic fingers," Regina chuckles. "Are you ready to resume our run?"

"Yeah, sorry about that little distraction," Emma apologizes, once again falling into step behind Regina. She can't help but notice that the brunette has adopted a slightly more relaxed pace, no doubt for her benefit, and she feels a small pang of guilt.

"Nonsense, dear. I agreed to train with you, knowing full well that you were less experienced. I can hardly blame you for slowing me down a little."

The two women jog for a few minutes in silence before Regina turns her head to address her new running buddy again.

"Emma, I'm sorry," she says abruptly. "For earlier. I shouldn't have been so rude."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Emma replies, slightly surprised and grateful that she hadn't done something to upset the other woman and bring out her "Evil Queen" persona. "I...um...most people aren't their best at five in the morning. No hard feelings."

"Thank you. I didn't exactly sleep well last night, and I normally need a few miles to clear my head."

Emma cocks her head to the side, shocked by her normally aloof partner's admission. "Totally understandable," she says quickly. "You know, it *is* Saturday. We could have slept in for a few more hours if you had a rough night."

"Yes, we could have," Regina admits, "but I enjoy seeing the sunrise."

She turns her head back around and quickens the pace again. Emma hums in confusion and picks up her feet, determined to keep up.

"Well, Regina, your scar tissue is healing quite nicely," the doctor says, his voice loud and falsely pleasant as he carefully avoids meeting her gaze. "You're making much faster progress than expected, given the nature of the wound."

Regina grunts noncommittally. She can't remember the last time someone looked her in the eye; even her parents can't do it. They're afraid of what they might see if they look too closely: pain, emptiness, desolation.

Or the worst of all: nothing.

Not that she cares. She doesn't want to see their pity.

"So, what does that mean for her activities?" Robin asks. He and Marian have insisted on accompanying her to all of her rehab appointments, to "make sure she's following doctor's orders." She'd like to punch both of them in their throats, but all she has the motivation to do these days is lie on the Locksleys' couch and count cracks in the ceiling. There's really very little danger of overexertion.

"You are free to increase the intensity and duration of your physical activity, as long as you don't feel any pain." Her doctor may be awkward, but at least he always makes sure to address her. *"I know you'll want to get back into shape for work, but I'd suggest something a bit lower impact to start out with; perhaps swimming or cycling instead of running?"*

"And if she insists on running?" Marian asks. Regina makes a face at the woman, knowing that it won't be noticed - both she and Robin have awkwardly averted their eyes from the patient they're discussing.

"You can try running short distances if that's what you want," Dr. Sims says hesitantly. "Just...stop if you're feeling acute abdominal pains, okay?"

"Of course," Regina grumbles and shoots the meddling Locksleys a glare. Whatever intervention they're planning, she has no intention of performing any physical activity, and she doesn't speak to either of them for the rest of the day.

She doesn't think about running at all until late in the night - or early in the morning, depending on who's talking. White is leaning, leering, over her, the knife in his hand glittering in the moonlight. Her gun is on the bedside table, but she doesn't reach for it - why the hell didn't she reach for it sooner? - the only thought in her panicked and exhausted mind is to shield her baby. Her throat is hoarse from screaming as she clutches Daniel, his eyes blank and unseeing as his blood gushes all over the bed, and suddenly, there's a hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake.

She comes to with a start, and stares angrily into Robin's concerned eyes.

"Regina, are you alright?"

She refuses to acknowledge him with a reply. Her heart is still pumping too quickly for rational conversation. She knows what comes next in her dream; it may be a memory but the adrenaline coursing through her veins is very real and very present.

"We're about to leave for our morning run. Join us?" Marian offers.

Regina wants to protest that she has no interest in moving her somehow still sore body and even less in third-wheeling on the couple's ridiculous activities, but before she even knows what's happening, Robin is shoving a pair of sneakers in her face.

"Doc cleared you," he says with an infuriating grin. "You want to keep sleeping at our place, you gotta embrace the lifestyle."

Her mind is screaming that she doesn't want *to sleep at their place - she never wanted any of this - but her body is giving into routine, and she puts the sneakers on her feet and silently, numbly follows the pair of morons out the door and down to the river.*

For the first five minutes of brisk jogging, she almost wants to thank them. The jolting sensation of feet pounding against pavement rejuvenates her, so familiar and yet so foreign after months of convalescence. She's almost fallen into a comfortable rhythm - perhaps a bit slower than Robin and Marian's warm-up pace, but perfect for purging the shadows from her brain and connecting to her body again - when she feels an sharp, searing pain in her abdomen.

Doubled over and panting, she tries to grit through the pain, but the imbeciles immediately notice and stop running.

"Pain already?" Robin asks.

"Apparently, taking a knife to the uterus can cause lasting damage," Regina hisses through clenched teeth. "Who knew?"

"Do you need to stop?" Marian asks, placing a soft hand on her shoulder which Regina forcefully shrugs off. It's bad enough that all

the other runners and cyclists on the trail are rubbernecking as they pass by, she doesn't need her supposed friend's pity on top of that.

"I'm fine; you go ahead," she mutters. She hobbles off the trail and tries to get her breathing back under control as the world swims before her burning eyes. Once the Locksleys have disappeared around the bend, too far off to cast any more worried glances her way, she allows herself to sink to the ground on her knees, arms wrapped tightly around her throbbing midsection. She can feel the rough lines of scarring through her shirt, the tissue raised and still slightly pink and enflamed. It's odd that it's so warm when the rest of her is cold. Cold like Daniel and the baby who would have been due - she checks her watch - today.

She swallows hard and presses her eyelids together to keep the tears at bay.

God, it hurts. Everything hurts.

She wants Daniel.

She wants Daniel to wake her with sweet kisses on her forehead and tell her this was all a horrible dream and it's time to get up and paint the baby's room.

Instead, she opens her eyes and she's kneeling on the grass next to the Charles River, a jagged scar across her stomach the only reminder

that there was ever a baby at all.

"Hey, do you need a hand getting up?" a voice asks from above her head.

She allows whomever it is - she doesn't even look up to see the face - to help pull her to her feet and stumbles wordlessly back to the trail to continue her "run." She imagines she must resemble Quasimodo because she's still bent nearly in two, hands pressed against her stomach like her insides will fall out if she lets go.

Slowly shuffling her feet, she starts inching her body down the trail at a pace most octogenarians would feel comfortable with, but it feels good to be moving again. Well, not exactly good *- better, at least. Forward motion. Daniel would want her to keep running, she thinks. Through the tears streaming freely down her face, she catches a glimpse of the first pink rays of dawn emerging over the river and takes another shaky step forward.*

Both Regina and Emma are in good spirits after their morning run, but their mutual endorphin highs are brought to a premature end as they enter the squad room. Locksley is there to meet them, wearing a suit and a grim expression.

"Mrs. Billings is in my office," he says quietly, "and I'll expect you two there in five."

"What's that about?" Emma asks her partner in a whisper as soon as the lieutenant's back is turned. "Did we do something wrong?"

Regina shrugs. "We don't have any leads. Whether or not that's our fault, well...that remains to be determined."

"So she's pissed."

"You probably would be, too, if your husband was murdered and the cops couldn't figure out who did it," Regina points out. *Or, at least, that's how you would act if you wanted the cops to believe you had nothing to do with it*, she thinks, but she avoids speaking the thoughts out loud with the widow in the next room.

"But we think-"

Regina quickly shushes her partner. "Yes, we do," she whispers. "But we have no evidence, and we can't let her know our suspicions or she'll be able to cover her tracks. We have to lull her into a false sense of security. Are you ready to go?"

Emma straightens her shoulders and smooths her slightly wrinkled blazer. "Yeah, sure," she says hesitantly. Regina has to work very hard to resist the urge to give the younger detective a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

Mrs. Billings greets them coldly when they enter Locksley's office. "Detectives, you lieutenant has led me to believe that you have made no progress in finding my husband's killer. Please tell me he is mistaken." Beside her, Locksley looks apologetic, and Regina fights to suppress the glare she'd like to send his way.

"Mrs. Billings, I assure you that we are working tirelessly to find your husband's killer," she confidently tells the widow, "but these things take time."

"So you've made no progress."

"As I'm sure our lieutenant has informed you, we have determined the manner of your husband's death, but due to somewhat...strange circumstances, we have been unable to narrow down any suspects."

"Tell me," demands the incredibly forceful woman. "Perhaps I can help."

Emma cocks her head towards Locksley, who nods as if to grant permission. "He died from a snakebite. We're very sorry."

Mrs. Billings narrows her eyes. "A snakebite? So the murderer is a snake?"

"Unfortunately, this was not an accidental death. The bite was from a very rare and tightly controlled snake that couldn't have gotten into your house on its own. We've had Animal Control searching your property, so you don't accidentally suffer the same fate when you return home."

Emma watches the widow's face carefully. She seems slightly shaken upon learning the cause of death, but the young detective can't figure out if that's something that should be arousing her suspicions.

But what she says next definitely is.

"It was obviously an Arab terrorist organization! Where else would they have gotten the snake?"

"We didn't-" she starts to say, but Regina shushes her with a swift elbow to the chest.

"You mentioned that your husband received some death threats from terrorist groups," the senior detective says evenly. "Could you tell us more about those? Did you say they were Middle Eastern?"

"Of course they were." She launches into a rant about how her husband had made some off-the-cuff remarks about the 9-11 Memorial in New York and 'hate mail' from Muslim groups immediately started pouring in. Emma isn't really listening. She's already made up her mind about this woman.

"Here's the thing," she says, "we didn't find any of those threats. His office didn't have a record of them. Without physical evidence, we don't have any leads, and we can't use that in court."

"Right," Regina adds, "so it would be extremely helpful if you happened to keep any of these notes, or at least made copies of them, so we can track the senders."

Mrs. Billings looks highly offended, even enraged, at the suggestion. "You don't believe me, do you? You're on their side. This is why the terrorists are winning!" With that, she storms out of the office, slamming the door behind her.

Locksley raises an eyebrow. "Is it just me, or is she a little..."

"Crazy? Racist? Obviously suspicious?" Emma suggests.

"Yes on all three. Please tell me she has an alibi, and that we didn't accidentally leak the Agrabahn viper detail to the press."

"We didn’t?" Emma asks, shocked. "I mean, I understand why we want to keep that under wraps, but shouldn’t the public be warned that there's such a deadly snake on the loose?"

Locksley shakes his head. "We're thinking that whoever did this was targeting the Senator specifically, and they're probably experienced with snakes to have gotten their hands on one so rare. There's been no sign of it near the Billingses' neighborhood, so my guess is that whoever let it loose already packed it up."

"The wife is clean," Regina says with a sigh, "but we're still investigating her."

"See that you do," Locksley orders. "And look into all of her associates as well. I want no detail of this woman's life unturned, but try to keep it under the radar. We don't want to be seen as persecuting a grieving widow before we have legitimate evidence."

"We've got an anonymous tip," Emma remarks, eyebrows raised in surprise. "I thought that stuff only happened on TV."

"Oh, it happens, but it has a tendency to make our lives more difficult when we have to bring it to court," Regina grumbles. "What have we got?"

"Photos of the Senator's wife with this guy," says the rookie detective, jabbing her finger at a grainy, black and white photograph of Mrs. Billings leaving a five-star restaurant with a well-dressed man. He's tall and appears to have dark hair, but that's all she can deduce from the picture. He could be anyone, but probably not her husband: he was short and prematurely graying.

"Do we have any leads on 'this guy's' identity?"

"Locksley just met with a few of the senator's family members and showed them the photo. They seem to think it's their estate lawyer."

"Oh," Regina mumbles, dismayed. She was hoping for something interesting, at the very least. "Every wealthy family has an estate attorney, or several. Fancy dinners are just part of the act."

"And you know this how?" demands Emma, a playful smirk softening the harsh tone of her voice. "Are you secretly loaded? Do *you* have an 'attorney?' Are you just working here for fun?"

"I do not," Regina says with an exaggerated eye-roll. "But my mother does, so I know the routine."

Emma shoves the picture in her face again and asks, "Yeah, well, does your mother dress like *that* to meet her fancy estate attorney?"

Regina squints at the photo, holding it closer to her eyes so she can see Mrs. Billings's dress. Even through the blur, her cleavage is quite visible. She slowly shakes her head.

"Thought not."

"I suppose it's worth looking into," she reluctantly allows. She's not particularly interested in pursuing another round of dead ends when they've made no progress on the case, but they have to do *something,* and she'd prefer it be away from the station. Nolan and Jones are about to return, and she'd rather have her toenails pulled out one-by-one than listen to those morons all afternoon, especially if Jones plans to continue his childish flirtations with her partner. "Is there even a date on that photograph?"

"Nope - taken on someone's crappy cell phone camera, printed without a timestamp."

"Wonderful," Regina groans. "Does this sharply-dressed lawyer at least have a name?"

"Yup, Sidney Glass."

They're in the car on the way to his address when Emma asks, "So your mom has an estate attorney, huh? That means you're filthy rich, right?"

"I'm not comfortable having this conversation," Regina says curtly, eyes fixed on the road. "But, yes, I guess you could say that my parents did quite well for themselves."

Emma is typing onto her phone screen, and Regina has the sinking feeling that she's being Googled. She sighs heavily and glances at her GPS, irritated by the traffic on Commonwealth Ave - still thick and it's already past noon. What should have been a fifteen minute drive is probably going to take thirty

Emma gasps. "Damn, your mother is Cora Mills? *That* Cora Mills? How did I not know that?"

"Perhaps because prior to this afternoon, you were not a stalker."

"I'm sorry?" Emma says quizzically. She seems to have realized that she's steered them into a difficult territory. "I'll put the phone away, okay? Why are you so uncomfortable about having money? If *my* mother was the CEO of Mills Financial, I'd be flaunting it. I also wouldn't be a cop - why are you a cop, anyway?"

Regina lets out a groan and clenches her jaw. "I wanted my own life, and a car with a siren," she mutters. "What about you?"

"I just thought the uniforms were sexy," Emma says lightly, and Regina can't stop a small chuckle from escaping.

"But now you're not wearing a uniform anymore," she points out.

"I know! And you won't let me wear my jacket! I have to say, I've been feeling very uncomfortable in my work clothes, lately."

"That jacket is completely unprofessional," Regina mutters.

"I guess you would know, huh? So, really, why are you so uncomfortable talking about your money? Your mom is super-successful - what's there to be ashamed of?"

Regina wishes she could close her eyes, but she has to keep them on the road. She hates this conversation, every incarnation of this conversation.

"Because," she snaps, "whenever it comes up, people start asking why I'm a cop, like this job is a step down in life. I don't understand why it's so hard to believe that I would choose work that I found interesting or fulfilling just like anyone else, and I shouldn't have to justify my decisions. You're a cop - why do you *think* I do this job?" Emma looks taken aback and a little bit terrified, and Regina realizes too late that she's now yelling.

"I...um...I get it. I think," Emma mumbles. "I didn't mean to come across as-"

"I know," Regina says in a slightly softer tone. "And I shouldn't have snapped, but this job is *everything* to me, and-"

"Yeah, it's a sensitive topic. As I said, I get it. I know how it feels to have people questioning your life decisions constantly - it was none of my business."

Regina exhales. "Yes, I suppose you do," she muses, remembering Emma's comments about being a teenage mother. She imagines her partner has faced a lot of difficulty in her past that she hasn't been completely open about. She's surprised to find herself hoping that someday Emma will share all of it with her.

"Anyway, I think we're here," Emma says. She points at the fancy marble building just ahead of them and reads, "Simpson and Glass, Attorneys at Law."

"I believe we are," Regina agrees, expertly parallel parking beside the building with barely a second glance in her mirrors.

Emma whistles appreciatively. "That was impressive. I consider myself a pretty experienced Boston driver, but I still get anxious about parallel parking."

"I could do it in my sleep. In fact, I'm pretty sure I have," Regina says with a short laugh. "But only in this car."

"Well, maybe someday I'll achieve your level of greatness; that is, if you ever let me drive," Emma teases. "Do you have control issues or something?"

"Or something."

"Cool. So, how do you want to play this?"

"*Play* this?" Regina raises an eyebrow as she steps out of the car, straightening her jacket. "What do you mean?"

"You know, questioning the suspect. How are we going at him?"

"Well, first of all, he's not yet a suspect, so we're going to be very friendly and thank him for his time. And then we'll see where we go from there."

"Man," Emma grumbles jokingly, "I hate being friendly. When do we get to the good part?"

"Hopefully soon. I can't wait to close this case."

The two detectives take the elevator up to Glass's office, where his secretary informs them that he's meeting with a client but should be available in about ten minutes. Regina sits primly on a leather couch and watches her partner take in the sights of the well-decorated waiting area like Dorothy seeing the Emerald City for the first time.

"Not in Kansas anymore?" she jokes.

"Huh?" Emma isn't listening - she looks about five seconds away from whipping out her phone to take some pictures. "Is this a crystal chandelier? If this is just the waiting area, what do you think his actual office looks like?"

"I imagine we'll soon find out," Regina says with an amused grin. At the exact same moment, the secretary says, "Mr. Glass will see you now."

"I guess we will," Emma agrees. She follows Regina, almost shyly, into the office, where the lawyer is waiting for them with a friendly, if pompous, smile and a five-thousand dollar suit.

"Sidney Glass, Esquire," he says, rising from this desk to shake their hands. "What can I do..."

His voice trails off as he lays eyes on Regina, his eyes taking on a darker, almost lustful tone. The senior detective internally groans - she doesn't want to play this game today. Beside her, she hears Emma snort and almost wants to reprimand her before she realizes that the attorney apparently hasn't yet noticed that her partner exists.

"Mr. Glass," she says authoritatively, "I am Detective Regina Mills, and this is my partner, Detective Emma Swan. We would like to ask you some questions about your work with the Billings estate."

"Yes, of course," he says absentmindedly, eyes on Regina's chest. "Anything you want to know."

Robin glances up from his desk as Mills and Swan enter the squad room, one of them (the usual one) looking pissed and the other distracted by a conversation on her cell phone. He pokes his head out his office door and asks, "How was the lawyer?" with some trepidation, wondering why Regina practically has steam coming out of her ears. She's been so much more pleasant over the past week or so, even with the stress of this case. He thinks Detective Swan - this friendship or whatever it is they that they're developing (he's not going to judge) - has been good for her.

"An imbecile," she says shortly. "And a very bad liar."

"Do you think he's involved?" he asks urgently. "If there's any chance-"

"He's involved in something," Regina grumbles. "Whether or not it's murder, well, we have no evidence, except that he's a bad liar."

"His dinner date with Mrs. Billings?"

"Claims it was a business meeting about changes to their will, but the will has been kept in a safe that hasn't been opened in years, according to the family."

"Family members can lie, too," Robin points out. Unnecessarily, because Regina fixes him with an icy glare. "Or be misinformed."

"I'm well aware. He also clearly has a thing for Mrs. Billings. You should have seen the way he salivated at this blurry little photograph."

"Okay, well, 'clearly has a thing for her' isn't exactly going to hold up in court," Robin says lightly, chuckling as Regina looks at him like he's a bug on the bottom of her shoe. Sometimes humor is the only way to deal with her mood swings.

"I-"

"You're aware of that. Yes, I know, Detective. Just practicing my 'stating the obvious' skills."

She huffs angrily at being preempted and turns away. "I know he's involved somehow," she sighs hollowly. "But this case..."

"Tell me about it," he agrees. "How's Swan doing?" he asks, gesturing to the younger detective who is still talking on the phone, rather intensely, it seems. "Is everything okay with her?"

"Hm?" Regina seems surprised by the question. "She's fine, as far as I know. I think she's just talking to her son."

"Her son?" Robin raises his eyebrows in surprise. He hadn't known Swan was a mother - it's not something he would have necessarily pictured.

Just then, they overhear her saying, "Well, I'm back at work now, kid, so I have to go...Yep, see you in a few days. Love you, Henry!"

"Henry?" he wonders. "Wasn't that..."

He realizes a little too late that he was actually speaking out loud, and that, although he can't see his former partner's eyes, face has paled considerably, and her jaw is now clenched in fury and, he knows, something else much darker. *Shit*.

"Regina, I didn't-"

But she's already storming away.

The next couple of days are hell for everyone on the homicide squad, and Emma thinks she's figured out how her partner was nicknamed "The Evil Queen." They can barely get through half an hour without someone incurring her wrath, usually in the form of a sarcastic comment, but sometimes it's open hostility. Even Locksley, who seems largely immune to her comments despite being the most frequent recipient of them, is walking on eggshells around her.

"Detective Swan, do you have to type so loudly?" Mills demands. The occupants of the squad room collectively hold their breaths.

"Yes," she mumbles, "unless you want to buy me a new keyboard with quieter keys." She has no idea what happened to drive her partner into such a state, and she's even less clear on why it's been going on for so long. Is it the case? Something Emma said or did? Her personal life?

Does Regina even have a personal life?

She's pulled out of her pondering by a dinging sound from her computer - an email from Officer Lucas, who has been trying to dig up leads on Sidney Glass. With wide eyes, she reads the information and grins. They might have something.

"Hey, Ruby found something on Glass," she tells her partner excitedly. "His brother is a snake breeder. He's based in Philadelphia, so he didn't show up on our initial searches."

"Really? Does he have Agrabahn vipers?"

Emma skims the email again and shakes her head, disappointed. "None registered, but that doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't have one."

"No, it doesn't," Regina agrees. "I suppose we should go question Glass again, and maybe talk to his brother."

"Do we have to go down to Pennsylvania?" Emma asks, wrinkling her nose in distaste. Henry's supposed to come to Boston tomorrow; she doesn't want to be out of town.

"First things first," Regina declares. "And I have a connection on the Philadelphia PD I can ask to do some recon for us. Let's ask our friend Sidney a few questions." After a quick call to his office to determine he's free, the two detectives are on their way.

Five minutes into the tense, silent car ride, Emma can't take it anymore.

"Look, I'm sorry for whatever I did to piss you off," she blurts out, "but could you just tell me what it was instead of taking it out on everyone?"

Regina looks surprised and somewhat confused. "You didn't do anything," she says.

"Well, you've been in Evil Queen mode ever since the last time we talked to Sidney. I figured it was because of our conversation in the car - you know, when I was talking about your mom and stuff."

"Oh, that," Regina says quietly. While she usually doesn't mind the nickname - it makes her feel powerful - she feels a pang of hurt at her partner's use of the term "Evil Queen," but she tries to push it down. She doesn't have time to dissect her increasingly confusing feelings about Emma Swan. "Don't worry, dear, my foul mood is entirely unrelated to you."

Well, actually, it's not, but that's a can of worms she's not willing to open with the woman now, or ever. It's not Emma's fault she chose to

name her son something that brings back unpleasant memories, or that Locksley was insensitive enough to bring it up.

Emma breathes a sigh of relief. "Good," she says, "I was thinking you might have been upset about when I asked you why you became a cop. You seemed really sensitive about it."

"Well, you may rest assured that I'm over it. That's not...that's not why you skipped our run this morning, is it?"

"Yeah," Emma says, eyes downcast. "I kind of assumed you didn't want to see me."

Regina bites her lower lip, heartbroken that Emma would ever feel that way and furious with herself for giving that impression. When did this happen? Why does she suddenly care so much about someone's feelings? "For future reference, it takes a lot more than asking me about a sensitive topic to incur my rage," she mutters, lying through her teeth.

"You want to hear mine?" the younger woman offers. "My reason for becoming a cop, I mean. The real one."

"Sure."

"A cop saved my life when I was younger. I was in a really bad place, and he talked me out of making a terrible decision. I didn't even know his name, but I've never forgotten him. I wanted to pay it forward, you know - help people."

Regina can't do anything but nod and attempt to swallow the painful lump rapidly forming in her throat. She doesn't want to hear this. Doesn't even want to begin to think about what terrible decision her partner could be talking about. Without being fully conscious of the act, she reaches out to grab her partner's hand, squeezing it tightly.

Emma looks surprised and more than a little uncomfortable. "I mean, it was a long time ago," she mumbles. "It's behind me now."

"Right." Regina clears her throat and releases the blonde's hand. "Well, it appears we've made excellent time - here's his office."

This time around, neither detective wastes time on pleasantries, though Glass still seems quite taken with Regina's figure and keeps offering them coffee.

"Mr. Glass," Emma asks, all business, "are you familiar with a snake called the Agrabahn Viper?"

"What? No, I can't say that I am," he says quickly, looking shocked and a bit sheepish, like he's hiding something.

"Really? Because your brother is a snake breeder. Has he never shared any information about his work with you?" Regina's tone almost sounds seductive, and Emma wonders briefly what her endgame is.

"He...um...no. My brother and I lead very different lives," Glass fumbles. Emma can't deduce whether he's so uncomfortable because he's hiding something, or because he's so turned on by the woman inching closer to him by the minute. "We've always had different aspirations."

"I see, so you're not very close with him, then?"

"He has a bit of an inferiority complex," Glass says with a forced laugh. "He's always been a bit obsessed with snakes, to compensate, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, I do," Regina practically purrs, letting out a giggle that sounds so fake to Emma's ears, but Glass eats right up. "And I suppose you don't have that problem?"

"Not at all. I've never had a problem with that...aspect," Glass says in what Emma assumes is supposed to be a flirtatious tone. He just sounds gross, and his hand is creeping dangerously close to Regina's-

"How dare you!" her partner hisses, grabbing his wrist and jerking him to the floor the second he makes contact with her ass. "Sidney Glass,

you're under arrest for assault on a police officer."

"Assault?" he sputters. "But I - you..."

"Touching someone in a sexual manner without consent. I assume you've learned the definition. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney..."

Emma smirks as her partner slaps a set of handcuffs on the stunned attorney and reads him his Miranda rights. It's a pretty good trick, she thinks, and she wonders if Regina will ever stop surprising her. That woman is an enigma.

The frigid February wind whips her hair and stings her cheeks as Emma stumbles to the edge of the bridge, still staring numbly at the pink plus sign on the thin white stick in her hand, stark against the dark, sluggish waters of the nearly frozen river below her.

How could she let this happen?

It was only one time. One stupid moment of curiosity and indiscretion and suddenly, she's pregnant.

She's wondered before, but now she's certain: the universe hates her.

She can't be a mother; she knows that much. She doesn't even know what one is supposed to do. And Neal...well, maybe he could be a father. But then, would they have to be together? She can't do that. If their not-so-magical night together taught her one thing, it's that she can't *be with Neal Cassidy. Or any man, probably.*

Then what?

She can terminate the pregnancy, she knows. Just walk into Planned Parenthood and walk back out a few hours later and forget this ever happened. But she won't forget; she knows that, too.

She'll never forget.

Until she's dead.

Jumping into the freezing, disease-infested waters of the Charles River is probably one of the more cliché ways to do this, but it's better than living the rest of her life alone and regretful.

She drops the offending white stick into the water first.

"Miss, littering is against the law," says a voice from slightly above her, on the other side of the railing. "I'm going to have to write you a ticket."

She stares at the officer in confusion. Seriously? A ticket? He thinks she gives a shit about some ticket?

"If you'll just follow me to my car so I can take down your information..."

He's serious.

"Fuck off," she growls.

"Miss, if you'll just give me your hand, I'll help you get safely over the railing," he insists, reaching for her wrist. She shoves him away.

"Just leave me alone," she mutters. "And stick your ticket up your ass."

"I'm going to have to arrest you for assault on a police officer," he says seriously, pulling a set of handcuffs from his jacket pocket. "You have the right to remain silent-"

"What the hell?" Emma demands, wrenching away from the officer's grip, but not before he manages to get a cuff around one of her wrists. He attaches the other one to the railing.

"Now you can't jump," he says smugly.

Fucking asshole.

"I'm assuming you didn't climb all the way to the edge of a bridge to throw a pregnancy test in the river. That was a pregnancy test, right?"

"None of your business."

"Positive or negative?"

"Still none of your business." Emma lets out a painful sigh and squeezes her eyes shut. She doesn't want to do this right now. She can't do this right now. Why did she have to hesitate for just fucking long enough for this guy to swoop in and make everything even worse.

Just when she thought it couldn't get worse.

"Technically, suicide is illegal, so it is my business as an officer of the law to prevent it. Also, I'm a human, and I'd like to keep all my fellow humans alive."

Emma rolls her eyes. "You're not very funny, you know."

"Wasn't joking. Or do you think a beautiful and intelligent young lady trying to throw herself off a bridge to almost certain death is a funny situation?"

She just grunts at him.

"How old are you, anyway? And where are your parents?"

"Seventeen, and I don't have any."

"Guardians?"

"I ran away, and I'm not *going back."*

"No, of course not," he agrees, "not if they're the reason you're in this situation. What's your name?"

"Why would I trust a guy who handcuffed me to a bridge?" Emma demands angrily.

Shockingly (and aggravatingly), he laughs. "As I said, intelligent. So, Miss No Name, let's make a deal. You tell me your name and promise not to jump, and I'll uncuff you from this bridge and agree to ignore the littering and assault incidents."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, technically, I can arrest you, and if you resist arrest, I can use force, which might not be great for your baby. I'll also throw in a new jacket and a donut if you cooperate," he offers.

Emma considers. She's been sick all morning, but now she's starving. She supposes she can always come back later when he's not on duty, or find a less conspicuous way to off herself.

"Bearclaw," she bargains.

"Deal. Now, what's your name?"

"Emma."

"Okay, Emma, I'm going to unlock the handcuffs. You better not make any sudden movements toward the water." He keeps his word, and she follows him to his cruiser, which is gratifyingly warm. He hands her a box of donuts, muttering that he thinks there's a bearclaw in there and if not they'll go get one, and starts digging through a bag in the backseat. Finally, he emerges and hands her a red leather jacket just as she's biting into a warm and delicious bearclaw.

"Here, someone gave this to my fiancée for her birthday, but she can't stand it. She says it makes her physically ill to look at, but I think it's pretty sharp."

"Was that someone you?" Emma asks suspiciously, shrugging her unencumbered hand through one of the sleeves.

"No, I'd like to think I know her taste a little better than that. Coffee?" he offers, holding out his own cup. "It's still warm, and I'm not sick."

"A few minutes ago, you were very concerned for the health of my unborn child," Emma points out, but she takes the cup gratefully.

"It's decaf. My fiancée is actually pregnant, too, and I'm giving up caffeine in solidarity."

"Must be tough for a cop."

"It's awful, but it makes her less cranky."

"You sound like you'll be a good husband," Emma observes, and she means it. "And a good father. Your fiancée and baby are pretty lucky."

"Thank you," he says with a soft and sincere smile. "We're excited for the future. We've started picking out baby names already - we just found out, like, two weeks ago."

Emma feels the ghost of a smirk creep onto her lips. She kind of likes this guy - he's a little crazy in the best way. "Oh yeah? What's it gonna be?"

"Well, we can't agree on girl's names, but if it's a boy, he's going to be Henry for her father."

"You don't meet too many Henrys these days."

"No, you don't," he agrees. "You know, maybe I'll suggest Emma as a girl's name."

Emma stares at the officer, thunderstruck and now thoroughly convinced of his insanity. "You'd want to name your kid after me?"

He shrugs. "Sure, why not? You seem like a pretty cool person, for all the ten minutes I've known you."

"Yeah, no. You don't know me at all. I'm not a good role model. I mean, you wouldn't want your daughter to jump off a bridge, would you?"

"No, but I would do everything in my power to ensure that she never felt she had to."

Emma tries to fight against the pressure building behind her eyes. "I can't raise a child," she tells this police officer she barely knows. "I'm only seventeen. I never had parents. I ran away before I could finish high school - I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Well, maybe you don't have to raise a child," he says gently. "Abortion is an option, as is adoption-"

"No."

"No?"

"I'm not abandoning my baby to the foster system. That's just - no."

"And the other choice?"

"I don't know. I thought about it, but..." she trails off, unable to accurately explain her feelings on the matter.

"It's not a decision you want to make lightly, I know. What about the father?" he asks.

"He's my...friend." She stops herself from saying boyfriend because she doesn't want him to be, not anymore. "It was stupid. I don't want to tell him."

"Why not?"

"He's...he'll want to raise the baby. He'll want to be a dad, and maybe he can, you know? He's older, he's finished school. Maybe he can be responsible-"

"How much older?" the cop demands, and Emma suddenly realizes she could be incriminating Neal by revealing his age, and she doesn't want that.

"He - I - it's..."

"You know what? Don't worry about it. You were saying he could be responsible?"

"Yeah, I think he could be a decent parent, maybe. But I don't want to be parents with him, if that makes any sense. We're...well, whatever we are, it's finished. I can't be with him like that."

"Why not? You make it seem like he's an okay guy."

"He is," Emma says quickly, "it's just...there's something wrong." She feels like an idiot, spilling her guts to this guy, but there's something about him that just feels trustworthy. He doesn't seem like he'll judge her. "Not with him, with me. I think I'm gay."

It's the first time she's ever said it out loud, and she expects fireworks or something. But instead, the cop just takes a bite of his donut and pats her on the shoulder. "There's nothing wrong with you," he says reassuringly. "And you should talk about all of that with this guy. You said he's your friend, right? And you shouldn't have to be in this alone."

Emma's eyes fill with tears. "I'm just really scared," she admits.

"It's a scary situation," he says, putting an arm around her. "My fiancée and I are in our thirties with a steady income and strong support system, and we're still terrified about ninety percent of the time. It's normal to be afraid when you don't know what's going to happen next."

"But you're going to be a great parent," Emma sniffs. "We both already know that much."

"And so are you," he promises. "Emma, whatever you decide, I can tell you care so much about your baby already, and you're going to try your best to do right by him or her. Being a good parent means making sure your child gets its best chance, whatever that may be, and I know you'll do that."

"You're kind of an optimist, aren't you?"

"Of course, that's the only way to be. Well, anyway, I've got to get back to patrolling. Can I drop you off somewhere? Where are you staying?"

"Actually, I can walk," Emma says. "Thanks so much, for everything."

"My pleasure. Hey, Emma, I'm definitely naming my baby after you. I mean, as long as it's a girl."

"You should probably check with your fiancée first," she points out. "And I still think you should try to find a better role model."

"Nope. I'm still going with you. You will *be a great role model, Emma, I know it. One day, you're going to change someone's life."*

"So, now you're a fortune teller?"

"Nope, just calling it like I see it. Take care, Emma," he calls after her as the car drives away. Emma waves and walks confidently off of the bridge, no longer interested in jumping into the water below it. She wants to believe that cop; she wants to grab onto his optimism and hope; she wants to believe in herself.

Seven-and-a-half months later, when she gives birth to a healthy baby boy, she wants to name her child after that cop, like he promised to do for her, but she realizes that he never told her his name.

She goes with Henry instead.

Friday night can't come soon enough. Regina manages to trick Glass into saying something incriminating, but they can't get any evidence against Mrs. Billings due to attorney-client privilege, so the case is far from closed in Emma's mind. Still, Locksley seems to be in the mood to just let Glass go down for the murder.

"We have no evidence against Mrs. Billings," he says tiredly. "We don’t even have a plausible motive for her. Glass has confessed - he was in love with Linda Billings's husband and killed him so they could be together."

Regina shakes her head. "I don't buy it," she argues.

"I'm not going to stop you from investigating, but you have to admit we've got nothing," Locksley sighs.

"I've never known you to back down from uncovering the truth," Regina says angrily. "And now you just want to give up? How much of this is your own opinion and how much is brass and reporters crawling up your back?"

"I said I wouldn't stop you from investigating, and I won't. You have all weekend and nothing else demanding urgent attention. But, Regina, you know as well as I do that we sometimes lose."

"Maybe you do, but I don't," Regina retorts, storming back to her desk.

Emma glances between her partner and lieutenant, conflicted. She wants to keep investigating, but Locksley had just told them to leave, and Henry's train arrives in half an hour.

"Regina, I-"

"Go," the senior detective says shortly. "I might be here all night, I wouldn't want to keep you from your Friday night plans."

"Thanks," Emma mumbles.

"I imagine you'll be going to the bar with Nolan and Jones? I heard them discussing their plans with ADA Blanchard."

"No, actually," Emma corrects hurriedly, grabbing her bag. "South Station."

"Oh, right, your son," Regina says in a slightly softened tone. "Have a great weekend with him."

"I will. You have a great weekend, too. Don't work too hard." The senior detective laughs humorlessly and turns back to her computer screen.

Of course, Emma gets caught in traffic on her way to the station. She curses loudly and leans on her horn as fights against the rush hour traffic. She'd intended to be ready and waiting with a box of donuts, but instead she's sprinting into the station just as Henry disembarks the train. With Neal, of course, because neither one of them is willing to let their son travel alone, but he's promised to stay out of their hair for most of the weekend.

She's somewhat gratified, at least, to discover that she's not as breathless as she might ordinarily be from running up all those stairs. Her training must be paying off.

"Mom!" Henry hollers, running into her arms.

"Hey, kid! I missed you so much." She holds onto him longer and tighter than he might be comfortable with, but it's been too long and she's afraid he'll see the tears in her eyes if she removes her chin from the top of his head.

"Mom!" he grumbles.

"Okay, fine." Sighing, she pulls away and offers an awkward one-armed hug to Neal. "How was the train?"

"Awesome!" Henry says enthusiastically. "I took lots of pictures, and Dad bought cinnamon buns."

"We planned to save one for you," Neal mutters, playfully shoving his son's shoulder, "but things didn't exactly go according to plan."

"I'm a growing boy; I have to eat a lot. That's what the school nurse said on Health Day."

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure she was referring to vegetables," Emma jokes, ruffling his hair. "Speaking of which, I was thinking we could go to the North End, maybe get some Italian food tonight."

"I assume you'll be eating pasta primavera or something equally vegetable-y," Neal scolds his son and ex-girlfriend simultaneously. Emma has never been known for her great love of green foods.

"No way! Pizza!" Henry exclaims.

Emma laughs. "Who am I to deny my son some famous Boston pizza when he's been living in New York for the last month? He obviously hasn't been able to have a decent slice of pizza there."

"We can get mushroom and onion pizza," Henry suggests. "Those are vegetables. And cannoli for desert, from Mike's."

"Of course," Emma declares. "Like I said before, it's Henry Day. Your wish is my command." She puts an arm around her son's shoulder and leads him out to the parking garage, carefully avoiding Neal's most-certainly judging eyes. If she only gets to see Henry once a month, of course she's going to spoil him. Neal should have thought of that before taking him to New York.

"Dad, are you coming?"

"If you two don't mind, I'd also like some pizza and cannoli," Neal says with a slight hesitation. "Then I'll check into my hotel and let you have some quality mother-son bonding time."

"Yeah, that's totally fine." Emma grins as they walk to the car. She doesn't care about Neal, she doesn't care about their infuriating case, and she doesn't care about her mercurial partner. Her son is here; nothing else matters. She's happy.

Chapter 5

Henry chatters non-stop throughout dinner about every topic under the sun: the twenty-five or so books he's read since the last time they saw each other, his friends in New York, the new video game he wants for his birthday, comparisons between Boston and New York's pizza...everything. Emma had forgotten how much of a talker he's always been. The phone just isn't the same; there are only words, and no room to absorb the essence of *Henry*. She's missed him more than she even realized.

She sits silently and listens, a small, sad smile dancing across her lips. He just sounds so happy, and she reassures herself that living in New York with Neal has been good for him. That maybe letting him go was the right choice, even if it's the most painful thing she's ever done.

She did what every parent is supposed to do for their child: she gave him his best chance. It just happens to be that his best chance is without her, and maybe she has to accept that.

"Wow, kid, you really demolished that pizza," Emma observes, raising her eyebrows at the empty platter in front of them. She doesn't remember eating more than two slices, and Neal barely touched his, muttering something about trying to lose a few pounds to impress a woman at his gym. That means Henry must have eaten four - five? - slices on his own. *Yikes*.

It looks like it's starting to catch up with him, too. "Um...yeah...I'm kind of full now," he mumbles.

"Maybe it would be best to save the cannoli for another time, then," Emma says lightly, ruffling his hair. "We wouldn't want you to get sick on your first night in Boston."

Henry groans. "I'll be fine in an hour. I'm growing, remember? I need lots of calories."

"Yeah, probably not over a thousand in a single sitting, though."

"Please, Mom?"

How can she resist those big puppy dog eyes? Especially when her defenses are so rusty? "I'll tell you what," she proposes, "we'll go for a nice, long walk so you can digest before we get to Mike's. If you're hungry then, you can eat a cannoli. Otherwise, we'll wrap it up and save it for tomorrow."

"I'll be hungry again," Henry declares, his face resolute. "Anyway, they're no good the next day."

"Fine. Neal do you need a ride to your hotel?" Emma asks, just to be polite. There's a dangerous glint in her eyes that tells him he'd better not

say yes.

"I'm good with walking," her ex-boyfriend quickly replies. "It's a beautiful night, and I'm only staying about a mile away. Unless you think you might need some help cleaning up vomit later," he adds with a wink.

"We're good. There will be no vomit, right Henry? And if there is, I can handle it."

She glares haughtily at Neal, daring him to protest. She knows, of course, that Neal is, objectively, the better parent. He's older and more responsible and works regular hours at a stable, safe job and knows how to cook and all those things that social workers and their ilk look at to determine a fit home for a child, which is why she'd given him full custody without much of a fight. But still, she's Henry's mother. This is what she signed on for. She can take care of a little potential vomit on her own.

The mother-son pair walk happily down Fleet Street toward the harbor together. Henry is still babbling away excitedly - something about the Yankees. *When did he start caring about baseball?* she wonders. *And why isn't he a Sox fan?*

Has she had any influence on her son's life and preferences at all? Should she, perhaps, quit her job and become a better mother?

But, no, she tells herself, that wouldn’t do. Henry loves that she’s a cop – he thinks she’s a hero – and he’s happy in New York. She can hear it in his voice. She *did* do the right thing in letting Neal take him away, and she won't let her petty, jealous side convince her otherwise.

"So, Dad was saying that maybe one day the three of us can go to a Sox-Yankees game together," Henry suggests casually.

"The three of us, huh? Whatever would have given him that idea?"

"Come on, Mom," Henry groans. "We've done stuff all together before. I'm not saying you should marry him. It's just a baseball game."

"Good, because I'm not marrying him. You know that, right?" Although there has been nothing between Emma and Neal since the night Henry was made, they've always tried to keep things as amicable as possible, for the kid's sake. Even if that means spending time together when they'd rather not. It's worked out pretty well for the most part, and Henry's as well-adjusted as any kid from a so-called broken home can be, but sometimes she has the sneaking suspicion that he'd like his parents to get together. And she's not sure why that bothers her so much more right now than it ever has in the past.

"Yeah, of course, because you're gay. You already told me that."

"Right," Emma says carefully. "But, you know, even if I wasn't gay, your father and I might still not want to be together, and that's okay, too. It

doesn't change how much we love you, and even if we date other people, you will *always* come first."

Henry nods seriously. "I know. You already told me that, too. So why are you telling me again? Is it because of Dad? Because Tamara will never go out with him – she's way too cool." Suddenly, he gasps, and his eyes widen and glimmer with excitement. "Or did *you* get a girlfriend?"

"What? No way!" she exclaims, swatting him playfully on the shoulder. "What would give you that idea?"

"Well, why not?" he demands. "Isn't that what you're supposed to do when you're a lesbian – get a girlfriend? Have you ever even had one before?"

"I...yeah, of course I have!" If she's being perfectly honest, she hasn't. Not really. Nothing that's gone past a one-night stand. But her ten year old son obviously doesn't need to hear about *that*. "Anyway, if you're going to give me the third-degree about my love life all weekend, you can go back to New York. Tell me more about your school."

"Okay," Henry groans, giving her that same look Neal has that says this conversation definitely isn't over. "School is pretty good. English class is my favorite because we're doing lots of writing this year, but math and science are okay, too. Actually, everything is good, except my P.E. teacher's kind of evil."

"Yeah, your dad mentioned that was your lowest grade. What gives, kid? It's elementary school P.E. – you should be able to pull an A just by showing up and running when they say go."

Henry shrugs dismissively, and Emma makes a mental note to ask Neal about that later. She's got to stay up-to-speed on these things. "She's just evil," he says. "She doesn't like any cool sports."

Emma nods, pursing her lips. "Okay, evil sounds a bit extreme for not liking the same sports. What qualifies as 'cool' in the world of Henry Swan-Cassidy?"

"Fencing!" her son immediately shouts, eyes lit up with glee. "Or archery! Or maybe we could learn to ride horses...cool stuff, you know? Like knights do."

"Knights, okay," Emma laughs. "Unfortunately, you go to school in New York City, not fairytale land."

"It's called the Enchanted Forest, Mom. Duh."

"Oh, right. Duh!" Emma groans, whacking her palm against her forehead. "The Enchanted Forest. How could I be so ignorant?"

"It's not your fault," Henry quickly reassures his mother, patting her comfortingly on the back. "It's easy to forget your fairytale knowledge when I'm not around to remind you every day."

Emma smiles sadly. "Yeah," she agrees. "On that note, kid, I really miss having you around."

"I miss you, too. But it helps when I have a lot to do. When I'm busy, I don't think about it as much."

"Good strategy."

"Yeah, so what have you been doing to keep busy?" God, he sounds like an adult right now. How the hell did he grow up so much in just a month?

"Well, obviously, I've been working, and then..."

"Right, nothing. As I suspected."

"Hey!" Emma exclaims. "I do not do *nothing* outside of work. For example, I've recently taken up long-distance running."

Henry looks unimpressed. "How long is long?"

"Ten miles a day," Emma says proudly.

Her son wrinkles his nose. "You run ten miles a day by yourself? That will really help your loneliness."

"No, with Regina – Detective Mills, my partner from work. And who says I'm lonely?"

"Is she hot?" Henry asks, suddenly all too interested.

"She's – *what*? No. Henry! She's my colleague and mentor! She's one of the best detectives in BPD. Why are you even using those words? You're way too young to be objectifying women like that!"

"Sorry," he mumbles, looking down at his feet. "So anyway, if you're not interested in her in that way, is she at least your friend? Because you need some friends."

Emma considers the last couple of weeks. Her partner is cranky more often than not, and her feelings are frequently inscrutable, but she does think they've developed an interesting sort of rapport. "Yeah, I guess she is my friend," she says slowly.

"Good. Friends are good," Henry pronounces, and Emma feels vaguely guilty about the fact that her little boy is now so mature that he's the one looking out for her well-being. He's only ten. It should still be the other way around.

"Yes, friends are good," she agrees. "Tell me more about yours."

He launches into a detailed description of all the boys (and a few girls) he hangs out with at school and who has the high scores on which video games. Apparently, there are *much* cooler kids in New York City than Boston – surprise, surprise. He tells her all about the Creative Writing club he joined at his school and how he's collaborating with a girl named Grace (It sounds like he might have a tiny crush on her, but Emma's not about to open that can of worms on their first night together.) to write a book that's "a mash-up of all the best fairytales."

"I'll read some of it to you tonight before bed!" he says excitedly before his face suddenly turns bright red. "I mean...um...I'm too old for bedtime reading, but maybe..."

"I don't think it counts if you're the one reading to me," Emma immediately interrupts, heart shattering at the thought of her little boy ever being too old for anything – well, maybe not diapers and temper tantrums; she doesn't miss those. He's growing up far too quickly and now that he's in New York, she feels like she's missing everything.

Although, honestly, she was missing everything even when he was in Boston.

"Yeah, it probably doesn't," Henry agrees happily. "Anyway, in this story, the Evil Queen from Snow White curses everyone, but they all kind of had it coming because they kept making deals with Rumplestiltskin, when he was actually the one who made everything happen."

Emma smirks because "Evil Queen" makes her think of her partner, who kind of fits the nickname even though she agrees with Mary Margaret that it's sexist as hell. "Rumplestiltskin? The straw-into-gold guy?"

"Yeah! And in our book he has a lot of disguises, too. Like, he's Cinderella's fairy godmother and the beast from Beauty and the Beast."

"Sounds complicated," Emma chuckles. Leave it to her kid to be so twistedly creative. "What does she do to curse them?"

"We haven't decided yet, but we want it to be something kind of funny and weird. Something that's not actually that terrible when you really think about it, just ridiculous."

Emma considers for a minute, and then an idea that could certainly qualify as ridiculous pops into her head. "Hey, what if she cursed them to become regular people in the real world? That could be really funny."

"Yeah!" exclaims Henry, eyes shining with excitement. "And they could all live together in a small town and, like, fight with each other at town meetings, and nobody knows why they hate each other."

"Oh, and maybe they could have absurd town holidays, like 'Apple Appreciation Day' or 'Coal Miner's Day' and nobody has any idea why they celebrate them and the rest of the world doesn't."

Henry is getting really excited now, practically bouncing as they amble slowly along the Inner Harbor. "This could be awesome! I have to email Grace tonight and tell her! There's a lot to figure out, though, if we want the plot to make sense." Suddenly, he stops and says urgently, "Mom, we have to go home so I can type all of this before I forget."

Emma chuckles. "Okay, kid. Car's about a mile that way. Should we jog?"

He attempts to run for a few steps and then clutches his stomach. "No, too much pizza," he grunts. "Let's just walk fast."

"I guess this means no Mike's tonight?"

"It'll still be open tomorrow," Henry says reasonably.

"Sounds like a plan." She slings an arm over his shoulder and smiles to herself. Her kid is the weirdest. But he's also the best.

Regina groans as the sunlight from the window reaches her bleary, sleep-deprived eyes. Sitting up slowly and cracking her neck, she glances at her watch and sees that it's almost six. About an hour later than she typically wakes up, but that hour is all she managed to sleep last night.

Sighing, she laces up her running shoes and tries to stretch the kinks out of her spine. She'd forgotten how uncomfortable this couch was - or maybe she's just getting old.

No, it can't be that. She refuses to acknowledge the possibility any further.

She stops for a moment in their usual place to wait for Emma before realizing that of course her partner isn't going to abandon the son she hasn't seen in a month to go for a jog. Cursing her own idiocy, she quickly continues running down the trail and tries to ignore the hot tears leaking out of her eyes.

It's the wind. The wind is blowing dust and pollen in her face and she's reasonably certain she's allergic. This has nothing to do with Emma. Absolutely nothing to do with Emma spending time with her son. Regina is an adult. She doesn't feel petty envy.

Anyway, she likes running alone. At least, that's what she tells herself the first three times she turns around and feels her stomach clench in disappointment when she doesn't see the familiar blonde ponytail bouncing along behind her. The fourth time she turns her head, she manages to trip over a stick that's found its way onto the trail and goes sprawling across the pavement in front of all the other Saturday morning joggers.

Examining her skinned knee and trying not to let those pesky tears spill out - *You're not a child, Regina. Grown women do not show weakness.* - Regina decides to quit while she's ahead and limps her way back to the station, where she takes a long, cool shower and tries to think about anything besides what a mess her life has become. Or maybe, what a mess it always was.

Maybe her mother was right.

She's onto her third cup of coffee in the same number of hours - the baristas next door have threatened to cut her off - when she hears a very familiar voice cry out, "Auntie Gina!" Approximately ten seconds later, a small, warm body vaults onto her lap and wraps its skinny little arms tightly around her neck.

"Roland!" she exclaims, torn between joy that she gets to see the boy and annoyance that she has to see his father. "Did you come to help me with paperwork?"

"Me and Daddy bringed you brunch!" the little boy declares proudly.

"His idea," Robin clarifies, smiling infuriatingly from the doorway, "but I promise he didn't make it." He looks her wrinkled suit up and down and asks, "I'm guessing you sl - you stayed here last night?" She nods in affirmation, shooting him a brief glare over Roland's head. It's completely unfair for him to come here and bother her and use his son as a shield.

"Catch any breaks in the case?"

"No," she groans, tiredly running a hand through her hair. "But I'm not giving up just yet."

He nods. "Good. Where's Swan, by the way? Couldn't scare her into coming in with you?"

"Didn't ask. Her son's up from New York for the weekend, and I didn't want to intrude on their time together."

"Auntie Gina?" Roland interrupts. "Can I help you with the paperwork now?"

"Yes, of course, dear." She reaches into her desk to find the Disney coloring book and crayons she always keeps there for these occasions and says in her most official voice. "I need this picture of Snow White eating a poisoned apple done at your earliest possible convenience. It's for an extremely important investigation. You may sit at Detective Pinocchio's desk."

"Yes, ma'am!" The little boy grabs the supplies out of her hands and quickly plops down on Detective Booth's chair.

"Why is Booth 'Pinocchio,' again?" Robin queries.

"Because he lied, Daddy! He said his name is August, but that's not a real name! It's a month!"

"Of course," the lieutenant laughs. Once he's certain his son is occupied, he turns back to Regina and says awkwardly, "Right, you mentioned Swan had a son. What's he doing in New York?"

"I don't know, it's none of my business. It's not really any of yours, either."

He shrugs. "I guess it makes sense, you know? This job isn't exactly conducive to being a single parent. If I didn't have such a strong support system, well...I don't know."

"You'd give up the job," Regina says immediately, with a quick glance toward Roland, who is coloring like his life depends on it. "Don't even think about suggesting otherwise."

"Of course I would," Robin quickly agrees. "It'd hurt like hell, but I would. What about you?"

"What about me?" Regina fires back, carefully avoiding her former friend's eyes.

"Would you trade in your badge for motherhood?"

"What do you think?" she demands. He's been trying to push this on her for years now: *healing can only begin when you put a name on what's hurting you, Regina. You have to talk about it to start making it better.* But she won't do it. The scar tissue on her heart may be ugly and uncomfortable and still not fully healed, prone to leaking and drawing infection, but *anything* is better than opening those wounds again.

"I think the world isn't exactly forgiving of women who want to have it all," he answers cryptically, and Regina has to admit she's caught off-guard.

"Is that your opinion as a proud male feminist?" she snaps, masking her discomfort with hostility. It's not like Roland is listening, she reassures herself. The little boy is humming softly while focusing very carefully on coloring inside the lines. He's quite good at it, for a four year old. Very attentive to detail. Once he's better at reading and writing, maybe in a year, he'll be able to take over for Jones or Nolan.

"It's my observation as someone who has been very close to several women working in a male-dominated field."

"Is that supposed to be an apology?"

"I don’t know," Robin admits. "What do you think?"

"I think it's entirely unbecoming for us to have this conversation based on speculation about the life circumstances of a person of which we know nothing."

"Well, we certainly want to be unbecoming. What about brunch? Roland, would you like to show Auntie Regina her pancakes?"

Roland quickly catapults himself out of Booth's chair and snatches the plastic bag from Robin's hands. "It's from Granny's Diner next to our apartment!" he explains excitedly. "They have apple butter on them because it's your favorite!"

Regina fights the urge to roll her eyes at Robin. She can't believe he would be so desperate to rekindle their friendship that he would use his son to worm his way into her heart. But Roland looks so proud of himself that she can't resist giving the little boy a tight hug and affectionately mussing his hair. "I can't believe you remembered," she says, planting a kiss on his cheek. "You're such a smart boy, so much smarter than these idiots I have to work with every day."

"Daddy says we shouldn't call people idiots," Roland says seriously, but then he adds in a conspiratorial whisper, "but I think Detective Pinocchio and Detective Charming are reeeaaally big idiots."

"Regina, what have you been teaching my son?" Locksley groans.

"Not my fault he's smarter than his father," she jokes.

"Yeah, Daddy, I'm the smartest," Roland says proudly. "That's why Auntie Gina likes me best, 'cause I'm not an idiot."

"Auntie Gina should stop teaching you bad words and eat her pancakes before they get cold," Robin mutters.

Regina quickly takes a bite of her pancakes and makes a big show of enjoying them. "Roland, these are delicious!" she exclaims. "You really outdid yourself. I didn't know you were a detective *and* a chef!"

Roland laughs. "Auntie Gina, you're so silly! Granny made them, not me."

"Oh, my mistake."

"Anyway," the little boy says in his most important-sounding voice, "I gotta finish my paperwork so I don't get fired." He trudges back to Booth's desk and thoughtfully twirls a blue crayon between his clumsy little fingers, and both Robin and Regina fight to hold back laughter.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion," Robin says seriously once he regains control of his emotions. "But it really was his idea, and I figured you hadn't remembered to eat."

"Roland is always a pleasant intrusion," Regina reassures her boss and former best friend. "And you may have been correct," she mutters, glancing at the extra-large coffee next to her computer. She'd been offered a complimentary scone with the second cup, but of course she'd declined.

"Yeah, and you can be quite irritable when your blood sugar is low," he points out. "I thought Swan might be here, too, and that maybe you wouldn't want to show *her* your Evil Queen mode just yet."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Robin says quickly. "Just that I've noticed you're a lot more...friendly toward her than some of our other coworkers."

"Well, she's a lot less idiotic than some of our other coworkers," Regina fires back.

The lieutenant rolls his eyes at her. "I suppose you have a point."

Triumphant at winning that argument, Regina puts a large chunk of pancake into her mouth, and Robin opens the box of donuts he apparently also brought to the station. He selects a chocolate glazed and sits down next to her, and the pair eat in companionable silence for a moment, watching Roland painstakingly color all the details of Snow White's dress. She'd taught him that an accurate police sketch can often help catch a criminal. It almost reminds her of old times, but, even more now, it reminds her of what might have been, in a world where vicious serial killers and drunk drivers didn't exist and the four of them could still be saving the world and raising their families together like they'd planned all those years ago.

But she can't think about that. Not now.

"You know," Regina laughs, suddenly reminded of something, "she asked me why I became a cop. Emma did, I mean."

If Robin is surprised that she's actually starting a conversation with him, or bringing up her partner once again, he doesn't let it show. "Oh yeah? Which answer did you give her?"

She shrugs dismissively. "Something about wanting a cool car and pissing off my mother."

"Which you certainly succeeded in doing."

Regina nods sadly. "You'd think twenty years later, she'd be over it, but I suppose not."

"When's the last time you even saw her?"

"Christmas, actually. She's still trying to convince me to find a husband - tried to set me up with some accountant from her firm." Regina shudders. "The problem is that most men, if they're still single at our age...well, there's a problem."

"Gee, thanks," Robin jokes.

"Come on, you know I'm not referring to widowers!" she exclaims, elbowing him playfully in the chest. "I'm talking about men who are handsome and suave and filthy rich and still can't seem to land a long-term relationship with *someone*."

"Yeah, I got it. I'm ugly and poor," he says, feigning offense, and Regina smiles in spite of herself. It's been so long since she's had this - this kind of easy friendship. With Robin or anybody.

She's surprised to discover that she's missed it.

"I think your mother just wants you to be happy," Robin says thoughtfully. "But she shows it in all the wrong ways.

"I am happy!" Regina cries out in indignation. Robin purses her lips and gives her a look that says he doesn't believe a word.

"Are you? Really?"

Regina sniffs and holds her head high. This conversation is quickly becoming much too intimate, and she never should have initiated it in the first place. "Of course I am. This job makes me very happy. What about you?"

"Yeah, sure. The job's great, and I've got Roland," he says uncomfortably, casting a loving glance at the boy still absorbed in his coloring before looking down at his feet. His eyes flicker up toward hers for just a moment, and she meets them, staring unblinkingly at the pain she knows is reflected back in her own, deeply concealed but still

so very present, just lurking and waiting to creep up and take them down when it's least expected or wanted.

They understand each other far too well, she thinks, which is why she tries to avoid conversations like this one at all costs. Conversations full of those small little triggers that will bring all the pain bubbling to the surface again, like harsh, burning lava ready to destroy everything in its wake.

Like it's threatening to do right now.

"Well, my investigation has turned up nothing," she says loudly, ducking away from his gaze. "I might as well try to get to the gym before it becomes too crowded."

"Why do you have to go?" Roland whines. "My paperwork's not even done yet!"

"I'm sorry," Regina says sincerely, giving the little boy a fierce hug. "Thank you so much for my breakfast. I just...I have to go."

She kisses his forehead and deeply inhales his scent of trees and kiddie shampoo. Then she bolts out the door.

Regina may be a runner by nature, but weekend afternoons are always devoted to strength and plyometrics. She hates the exercises – she's never quite been able to get over the sensation of feeling awkward and undignified performing squat jumps – but over time, they've started to give her a certain sense of peace.

When her body feels strong, it's easier to ignore the fact that nothing else does.

It's a warm and sunny day, with the tiny green buds of springtime just beginning to appear, and she ends up at the Common along with hordes of other exercisers who had the same thought. The temperature is perfect for outdoor circuits, and as the endorphins kick in and the sweat begins dripping down her face, she already feels so much better.

She feels in control again.

She'd thought she was doing well, she truly had. After that incident with Locksley, she'd learned her lesson about letting people get too close, letting them in far enough to see the chinks in her armor. Yet somehow, she'd forgotten that things can exist without being seen, and the last few days have been a testament to the fact that pain long-buried can rise again and make itself visible all too easily.

So she has to fight it, she thinks as she drops down into a one-legged squat. She'll keep fighting and keep digging the hole deeper and deeper, because the alternative to exercise and whiskey and sarcasm is

something that scares her a whole lot more than looking down the knife of a serial killer.

Circuit finished, Regina takes a long swig of water and wipes her brow with the hem of her shirt. Checking her watch, she congratulates herself on a job well done and perfect timing – her irritating lieutenant and his disarming son will have certainly gone home by now, and she'll have the station all to herself for the evening. Or maybe, she can spend a weekend in her own home for once.

Yes, that's exactly what she'll do. Go home and prepare herself a nice meal and sleep in her bed like a normal human being.

She's about to close the door of her car when she hears an all too familiar voice approaching from behind. "You're right, I think the penguin show has improved since we last saw it."

"I know, right? The aquarium in general has gotten a lot better."

Emma. And the other voice must be her son. Henry, she thinks, and feels her heart sinking. She slams the door shut and hopes they didn't see her.

This won't do, her mother's words scold from somewhere deep in the recesses of her mind. *Remember your manners, Regina. Get out of the car and say hello.* But she can't. She can't get out of the car and meet a ten year old boy named Henry and talk to the partner who makes her feel so deeply and intensely confused.

But, evidently, she can watch them from her rearview mirror like a stalker. Both mother and son are carrying ice cream cones and engaged in conversation like they're the only two people in the world. Henry is saying something that must be funny, because Emma's head is thrown back and she's practically shaking with the biggest, happiest grin all across her face. Her long, blonde hair flies dances in the gentle breeze, reflecting the light of the sun's rays in such a way that strikes Regina as beautifully poetic until the thought is forced from her mind by the sight of Emma's arm draping affectionately across Henry's shoulders and the way he looks up at his mother with so much love, like she's his own personal hero and savior.

Even as she's happy – truly happy, because surely Emma deserves this, deserves to be surrounded by love and never have to suffer from dark and lonely thoughts again – she feels the heart she'd just carefully pieced back together shattering once again, and she leans against the steering wheel and fights against the burning sensation building up behind her eyes.

I'm disappointed in you, says the voice that comes half from Cora and half from herself.

"I know," she whispers, rocking back and forth in an ineffective attempt to soothe herself. "I know."

Once she finally feels calm enough to take the wheel, she drives back to the stationhouse and flops onto the break room sofa, pressing a cushion over her face to muffle the sound of the tears she knows are coming.

She doesn't make it home that weekend.

Regina, darling,

I hope you're well. It's been a while since I've heard from you, and I do have to admit I've become a bit concerned. I had hoped you would attend our Easter gathering, but the invitation must have become lost. A pity, because there was a lovely young gentleman I wished for you to meet. He's a very well-respected neurosurgeon with classic good looks. Oh well, maybe next time.

I assume you've been preoccupied with work. The Senator Billings case has been all over the news. I'd say it's a terrible tragedy, but when a man spends years treating his wife like a prized bull who exists only to service his own desires, well, I suppose you can say he had it coming. I certainly won't miss his incredibly irritating misogynist comments at dinner parties, let me assure you.

Anyway, do call sometime, dear. Your father and I are busy but content, and he sends his regards. We're planning a trip to the Alps for

one last weekend of skiing before the summer, if there's any way you can join us. But, of course, your job must come first.

Regards,

Cora Mills, MBA. President and CEO of Mills Financial.

Regina stares suspiciously at her computer screen. There's something bothering her about her mother's email, and this time it's not just the usual something.

"Emma," she calls out. Her partner has just dashed, panting, into the squad room, fresh from dropping her son off at South Station. "Come here."

"Sorry, traffic was a bitch this morning," the blonde wheezes. "What's up?"

"Just...read this," Regina says slowly, unsure if it's just her own exhausted mind creating stories where there are none, or if her absurd mother has somehow given them a clue to unlocking the case.

Emma appears behind her shoulder and quickly scans the email. "Skiing in the Alps!" the younger woman exclaims. "If you don't want to go, can I?"

"Not that!" Regina snaps. "The part about our case!"

Emma reads again. "Huh. Your mom knows the Billings family? Well, I guess that's not surprising – I feel like all the prominent families in this city know each other. She certainly has a way with words, though. What the hell does she mean by 'prized bull?'"

"That was my thought, as well."

"Interesting, too, that she seems so opposed to men using women as status symbols, like, one paragraph after encouraging you to do the same to a guy. And why does she sign emails to her own kid with her job title?"

Regina rolls her eyes. She realized a long time ago that paying any mind to such things will only lead to lost sleep and heartache. "Don't try to make sense of my mother, dear. I've been trying for over forty years with little success. We're talking about Senator Billings. Focus!"

"Okay, yeah, prized bull comment. You don't think there's any chance he was abusing his wife, do you?"

"Oh, I do," Regina says quickly. "I think there's a good chance. If not physically, then perhaps emotionally. Whenever you have a marriage where one partner vastly outranks the other in income or social status, well, I won't say it's inevitable, but it's always a cause for concern. I don't necessarily trust my mother's judgment, on anything, but I'd say it's worth looking into."

"But how? I mean, we could ask their other friends, but it would be hearsay at best. I doubt she'd admit to anything herself, not when she knows it could implicate her in his murder."

Regina sighs and exhaustedly pushes a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. "I don't know," she admits. "Gaining access to her medical records would require a court order, which would of course require evidence to obtain."

"You mean an email from the detective's mother doesn't qualify as probable cause?" Emma jokes. "What about that judge? The one you said owes you a favor?"

"Judge Gold?" Regina asks with a shiver. How the hell does Swan know about that? "He does, but I'm not going to use it to unnecessarily violate someone's privacy." No, she's saving that favor for far more dire circumstances.

Circumstances she hopes never occur, but she knows better by now than to be unprepared.

"You told ADA Blanchard to use it to get a search warrant," Emma reminds her. "On my first day. I remember overhearing the conversation."

"Yes, dear, it's called a quip," Regina snaps. "It would take several hundred search warrants on impounded cars to repay the debt Gold owes me, and he and Miss Blanchard both know that. Would you kindly stop prattling on about subjects you don't understand and focus on the case?"

"I...um...yeah," Emma mumbles, looking appropriately chastened, and Regina feels a momentary pang of guilt for her harshness. She blames it on stress and lack of sleep, and it's hardly Emma's fault, but she just doesn't have the time or energy to discuss her personal business with the blonde right now.

Especially not personal business that, even after ten years of trying to put it behind her, still has the power to push her to the brink of tears in the middle of the squad room on a Monday morning.

"What about Glass?" Jones asks from across the room.

"What about him?"

Regina rolls her eyes. Leave it to the prize idiot to intrude on *her* conversation with *her* partner. Next, he's probably going to start flirting in the middle of the squad room, *again*. It's only eight in the morning and she already needs a stiff drink.

"Well, I'm just thinking," Jones begins slowly, and it takes all of Regina's self-control not to snap back, "Don't strain yourself." Pausing briefly, he cocks his head to one side and observes, "You're both women."

And there goes her restraint. "Excellent observation, Detective Jones. Truly, you have acute powers of deduction. The department should increase your pay grade."

Jones just rolls his eyes, too inured to her particular brand of cruelty to be hurt by it, but Swan looks slightly shocked, and perhaps even more offended than she already did, and Regina drops her head and bites her lower lip as she feels an unfamiliar churning in her stomach.

"As I was saying," the male detective continues as though nothing out of the ordinary has happened, "you're both women. You're not married, but pretend for a moment that you are, and you want to leave your husband because you're in love with someone else. What do you do?"

"File for divorce," Emma replies quickly.

"That seems like the reasonable thing to do. And it doesn't seem especially reasonable for the other guy to step in and murder your husband, right? Unless-"

"Unless there's something preventing you from leaving," Emma interrupts. "Like power, or fear, or-"

"Right, and if the 'other man' is the one who actually committed the crime, then, unless he's crazy, we can assume that he did it because he knew about whatever factors were keeping you tied to the marriage."

"The problem with all your assumptions is that people aren't reasonable," Emma argues, and Regina feels the corners of her lips curl upward with pride for her partner. Anyone listening in would have no idea she's just a rookie – she speaks with the confidence of a much more seasoned cop, and she's right, too. "Especially ones that commit murder."

"You're forgetting one thing," Emma interrupts. "If said 'other man' is actually in love with you, as Sidney Glass seems to be with Linda Billings, it seems unlikely that he would admit to something that could implicate you in a conspiracy to commit murder."

Jones shrugs. "I'd still say it's worth a try to take a crack at him. Sometimes the sort of passion that makes you willing to kill for someone starts to fade when you realize it also involves doing twenty-five to life for them."

"You speak from experience?" Emma jokes, and Regina rolls her eyes. She's not in the mood to hear any ridiculous flirting this early in the morning.

"Never had the pleasure, but I'm still looking. Anyway, he might not have to know he's implicating her. You can make him realize a jury will be much more sympathetic toward his case if we can paint the victim as a villain."

Regina lets out a disgruntled burst of air through her nose and pushes against the back of her chair. "I never thought I'd find myself agreeing with Detective Jones, but this is worth a shot. Let's set up a meeting with Glass and his attorney and decide how to proceed once we know the truth. Call ADA Blanchard."

Emma shrugs and picks up her phone, and Regina presses her eyelids together with a weary sigh. It's only eight-fifteen.

"Hello, Mr. Glass," Regina begins with an entirely fake smile, "thank you for agreeing to meet with us today." Walpole doesn't seem to have treated Glass well, even for the mere three days he's been inside. Absent his pristine suits that are worth more than Emma's car, his

posture looks deflated, and the stubble growing across his jawline is gray, almost white, standing in sharp contrast to the black on top of his head. *Does he dye his hair?*

He looks like any other prisoner, a common criminal seated next to his immaculate lawyer. You'd never guess that three days ago, he was on the opposite side.

"Mr. Glass, we're willing to offer you a deal in exchange for answering a few questions," Mary Margaret says evenly. For someone who seems about as meek and mild as they come, the ADA doesn't show even the slightest hint of discomfort in the face of their grizzled suspect, and Emma has to commend her, because even she's shocked by Glass's prison transformation.

"A deal?" he barks, and Emma imagines her partner cringing on Blanchard's other side, remembering what the senior detective has said in the past about their ADA and deals.

"Yes, a deal," replies Mary Margaret. "A shorter sentence for the murder, and Detective Mills is willing to drop the assault charges if you cooperate with our investigation."

"That assault charge was bogus," Glass growls. "She came onto me! She-"

"Be careful, Mr. Glass," Regina scolds lightly, perfectly composed. "Who do you think a jury is going to believe? A decorated police detective, or a man who confessed to murdering his lover's husband with a snake?"

Glass's wild gaze alternates between Mills and Blanchard, and eventually he turns to his defense attorney and scowls. "I'll cooperate. What do you want?"

"Well, first, we'd like to confirm your story," Mary Margaret says, opening the case file to reveal a page of notes written in Regina's flowing, flawless penmanship. "You told Detectives Mills and Swan that you believed you were falling in love with Linda Billings. Is that correct?"

Glass nods.

"Then you stated that you wanted to take the relationship further, but her husband was standing in the way."

"Yes," he confirms verbally. "That's why I killed him."

Emma waits with bated breath for the ADA's next words. They'd practiced this multiple times on the car ride over. "How, exactly, was he standing in the way?" Mary Margaret asks.

Glass blinks and glances at his lawyer, who gives an almost imperceptible shrug. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean," he fumbles.

"The meaning is quite simple," Regina cuts in. "My colleague would like you to detail the precise actions, if any, that Senator Billings took to prevent your relationship with his wife."

"Actions?" Glass sputters. "They were married. I couldn't have an affair with a married woman. It's highly improper!"

"And murder isn't?" Emma snorts. If she wasn't already convinced this guy was lying, the words "highly improper" would have done it for her. "Wouldn't it have been much more 'proper' for Mrs. Billings to file for divorce?"

"Yes, Mr. Glass, isn't there a much more reasonable way to end a marriage, in which no one has to die? Did Mr. Billings really deserve that?"

"She...I..." Glass pauses to whisper something in his lawyer's ear. The defense attorney, an older gentleman who seems like he's been around the block a few times – in a tired way, rather than an intimidating way – looks perturbed and asks Mary Margaret for a few minutes alone with his client.

The three women file out of the prison conference room and watch through the sound-proofed window as Glass's lawyer speaks to him, waving his arms wildly in agitation. The suspect himself looks resolute. Whatever story he's telling, he's sticking to it.

"Poor fool," Regina mutters, crossing her arms over her chest and turning away from the scene with an exaggerated sigh.

"Regina, I think that's the nicest way I've ever heard you refer to a suspect," Mary Margaret laughs. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were going soft."

"Well, if *I* didn't know any better, I'd say you had a death wish."

"There's something strangely ironic about making death threats *inside* a prison, wouldn't you say?" Emma asks lightly.

"Shut your mouth, Detective Swan," Regina snaps. "Your peculiar humor is unfunny and unwelcome at this time!"

Eyes bulging, Emma takes a step back with her hands up in surrender as her partner turns to her with a stare blazing with a fury that's quickly turning to something deeper and darker she can't quite identify. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. You don't have to-" she quickly stops herself from making an 'Evil Queen' comment because, in a reaction completely disproportionate to the idle remark that was its antecedent, the other woman seems suddenly on the verge of tears.

"I need to use the restroom," Regina suddenly spits out. "I'll be right back."

Emma and Mary Margaret stare dumbfounded at the older woman's back as she marches purposefully down the hallway. Turning to the ADA, Emma sees her own confusion reflected back perfectly in the pixie-haired woman's completely blank expression.

"What was that about?" she finally asks.

"She's *your* partner."

Emma considers: should she go after her? Unfortunately, Glass's lawyer, looking more and more fatigued by the second, chooses that exact moment to call out that his client is ready to talk.

"Linda wouldn't have left her husband," Glass says. "She would have refused to file for divorce, and I couldn't ask that of her, so I took matters into my own hands."

"I see," Mary Margaret replies slowly. "And why is it that she would have refused?"

"Because she loved him, of course. She would have hated too much to break his heart, and I loved her too much to ask her to do that for me."

Emma exhales harshly and asks, "So, let me get this straight: you loved her, and you showed that by killing someone else that she loves? Because that really seems like a great way to win someone's heart."

"I had already won!" he exclaims. "But I wanted to save her the pain of having to choose."

Emma catches a glimpse of her own face in the two-way mirror and quickly tries to wipe derision from her features. Detective Mills, if she's out there, would surely find it incredibly unprofessional.

"That's your final answer, Mr. Glass?" Mary Margaret confirms, sympathetic tone completely gone from her voice.

"Yes. I killed Senator Billings for the woman I love."

"Right. Just so you know, your answers didn't satisfy me, so the deal is void," Mary Margaret says emotionlessly as she rises from the table. "I suppose I'll see you both in court."

"So, what do we do now?" Emma asks, once they've located Regina and safely merged onto I-95 on their way back into the city.

"You do nothing," the ADA replies. "And I prepare for trial – I'll probably start lining up an appointment for Glass with Dr. Hopper in anticipation of a 'not guilty by reason of mental defect' plea."

"You think he has one? A mental defect, I mean?"

"He's an idiot," Regina cuts in from the driver's seat, "in the social definition of the word, but probably not the clinical one."

"It's pretty standard in the defense lawyer playbook," Mary Margaret explains. "It's pretty much the next step when you can't plead innocent because they've already confessed. We'll get our own assessment and confirm that he's sane by every legal definition, and there shouldn't be too much of a problem."

"Okay, so what do we do about Mrs. Billings?"

"We do nothing," Regina says hollowly. "It's over. We're not going to get her, and maybe we shouldn't even want to."

Emma is about to ask – though she knows it might be at her own peril – what that's supposed to mean, but she's cut off by Regina's phone buzzing.

"Mills," the senior detective barks as she snatches the device from the cup-holder. "What is it, Locksley? Make it quick, because I'm driving."

Regina listens silently for a moment, and Emma is slightly disturbed by the fact that her face is growing progressively whiter as the lieutenant's monologue goes on. Finally, she mutters, "We'll be there," and hangs up with a shudder.

"What is it?"

"Shooting near the Mildred Ave Community Center. Five victims. It's going to be a long evening."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Warning: This plotline involves gang-related gun violence and deaths of children and all applicable trigger and content warnings that come with that.

Regina's announcement is met with stunned silence and devastated expressions from both of her passengers, and she debates with herself whether to reveal the rest of the information that the lieutenant shared with her. They say ignorance is bliss, and while the little knowledge they do have is certainly not blissful, maybe she should let them enjoy their ignorance for a few minutes longer.

But as she shoots a sidelong glance at her partner and remembers where the younger woman had been that very morning, she realizes that Emma needs advance warning.

Emma deserves advance warning.

This case is going to hurt.

Regina takes a deep breath and steels her nerves. Ruining people's days with horrible news is one of those things that gets smoother with practice but never easier. "The shooting is believed to be gang-related," she says through gritted teeth. "The victims...the victims were all middle school students on their way to an afterschool program."

She hears a sharp inhalation from the backseat, and Mary Margaret murmurs, "Oh good lord," but Regina ignores her, one eye still on the road and the other fixated on her partner.

Emma expels a small burst of air through her nose and looks down at her lap, saying nothing.

Every ounce of Regina's being longs to reach out and grasp the younger woman's hand. She can't even imagine what must be going through her mind right now – cases involving children are rough for everyone, she knows, but she's heard it's a million times worse when you have one of your own.

And this case...well, they aren't even at the scene yet and she knows it's bad.

Locksley had cried on the phone when he'd told her.

Locksley had barely even cried when his wife died.

If the man who had been the definition of stoicism and bravely pushing forward for the twenty-plus years she's known him is getting choked up over this situation, then what does it mean for the rest of them, mere mortals whose control over their emotions is not nearly so ironclad?

Her hand is itching to reach out, to offer comfort – though whether it's directed toward Emma or herself, she's uncertain – to find some solid ground in the senseless chaos that's rising rapidly around them, but she doesn't.

She doesn't because ADA Blanchard is behind them, and she's certainly not going to show even an instant of weakness in front of that insufferable woman who belongs to the David Nolan school of taking every opportunity to spew out rainbows and sunshine and hope.

Regina isn't even sure she knows what hope is anymore. Especially not when five children under the age of fifteen have just been shot dead in a place where they're supposed to be kept safe.

So, she drives on, hands clutching ten and two so tightly that sharp pains shoot through her ghost white fingers, watching in the rearview mirror through the corner of her eye as Mary Margaret buries her face in her hands and Emma stares numbly out the window at the evening that suddenly seems so much darker.

They pull up in front of the community center far too soon for Emma's liking. She watches as her partner and the ADA – "We don't have time to drop you off!" Regina had snapped, and Mary Margaret had simply nodded in understanding – exit the car and walk resolutely toward the crowd surrounding the yellow crime scene tape. Even through closed windows, she hears the frantic wails of children, of passerby.

Of mothers.

If she just stays here, shut safely inside the cruiser, maybe she can pretend it's not real. Keep her mind comfortably blank and forget that only a few inches of metal separate her from five dead kids and their grieving families.

She can forget what the world is constantly trying to remind her: that it's a cruel place where happiness can be ripped away more quickly and easily than it's found.

As quickly and easily as someone can pull the trigger of a gun.

Letting out a long, shaky breath, she opens the door and jogs to catch up to her partner, flashing her badge at the officer guarding the entrance to

the crime scene and trying to avoid the dark, haunted eyes of the bystanders. She's sure her own will look like that soon enough.

Dr. Whale is standing over one of the bodies – *one* of the bodies, she reminds herself, stomach rolling as she carefully averts her eyes – surrounded by Locksley, Jones, Nolan, and a whole bunch of uniformed officers she doesn't recognize. He nods in greeting as the two women approach, and quickly turns back to his work, the situation too grave for his typical lascivious remarks.

Locksley turns glassy eyes away from their fixation point on the victim's face and looks up at them."Five dead, ten injured," he rasps. "Critical victims have already been taken to the hospital, but we've got a few witnesses over by the EMT zone. They're pretty shaken up. Mills-"

"I'm on it," the senior detective says shortly, and if Emma hadn't already thoroughly felt the magnitude of this scene deep within her aching heart, she would have realized it as soon as she witnessed Regina following the lieutenant's orders without question.

"Swan, Nolan, you need to locate the families. Get positive IDs on the bodies and interview them about any possible gang connections." Nolan nods his assent and Emma numbly mirrors his actions.

"Jones, some officers just radioed in about a discarded gun located a block or two away. Make sure the crime lab gets to it right away and work with Booth back at the station to trace the owner. We need to nab this shooter. Yesterday."

Jones starts jogging toward one of the cruisers, and Emma turns toward Nolan to ask what's next just as Locksley mutters, "And as for me, here comes the press." She sees the flashbulbs going off in the distance and hears the rumble of voices talking all at once and scowls. There are times when she can't even believe the media's blatant disrespect for people's grief.

She watches as Locksley straightens his back and walks headlong into the flock of reporters, questions firing at him from all directions. There are considerably fewer, she notes, than there were after the senator's body was found, but it's still a sizable crowd. She imagines she might feel impressed at his composure if she were able to feel anything at all.

But she can't, so when Nolan bends over the body of the dead little boy – and he is little, only a few inches taller than Henry at most, she notes when she finally forces herself to look at him – and extracts a school I.D. from his pocket and reads aloud that his name was Michael Hernandez and he was in seventh grade, she only nods numbly instead of bursting into tears.

"We didn't get student I.D.s until high school, back in my day," Nolan remarks absentmindedly. "But I guess our security was a little looser."

Emma feels her head move in a nodding motion, but she's not listening. She bends over the next body, a tall, skinny girl with pink glasses, and rifles through her backpack. "Bria Lawrence," she says in a monotone, reading the name off the front of a notebook covered in doodles of animals. "Sixth grade."

"Fuck," Nolan mutters.

Emma glances at the paper still in her hand, a science test – "100%! Great job!" says the note in red at the top – and abruptly drops it, feeling it scorch her fingertips like a hot branding iron. But when she looks down at her skin, there's nothing there.

The pair makes quick and silent work of the next three bodies, two boys and one girl: Jerome, Oscar, and Ayana. Seventh and eighth graders. From the garbled wails she can pick up from the community center director's conversation with one of the officers, they were on their way to the meeting of some sort of academic club.

Good kids, Emma thinks sadly. Smart kids. Working their asses of to get the hell out of Mattapan.

Not that their intelligence makes the crime any more or less devastating.

"I'll try to get contact information from the community center," Emma offers, voice raspy and cracking in spite of her best efforts, "for their families. You try the school?"

"Yeah," Nolan agrees, squinting at Michael's I.D. card for his school's number. With a deep sigh, he pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and begins dialing.

Emma turns away and makes her way over to the director. She can't even imagine how the woman must be feeling, to have five kids murdered and ten more badly hurt while under her care. Not that any of it is her fault.

Maybe in this neighborhood, she's used to it.

Not that this is something you could ever get used to.

"Hi," she chokes out, extending a hand to the weeping woman and the officer who seems to have finished her interview but hasn't yet left. "I'm Detective Emma Swan. I'm...I was hoping to get the victims' parents' contact info."

"Officer Mulan Fa," the officer says solemnly after a quick glance toward the director confirms that she might not be up for talking any time soon. "This is Rita James; she's in charge of all the programming here."

"These kids have all been coming here for years," she older woman sobs. "I loved them like my own children. I can't...I can't believe..."

She breaks down again, and Officer Fa awkwardly reaches out to pat her on the back, a grim expression on her face.

"You okay?" Emma asks the younger woman, and she instantly regrets her words because the answer is blatantly obvious. Who could be "okay" at a time like this? But at least asking other people unnecessary questions distracts her from the tumultuous grief and anger twisting within her own gut.

Officer Fa shakes her head. "I've been working this neighborhood since I started out. I – I knew some of these kids, from the center. I teach here sometimes...self-defense. Not that any of it is actually helpful if some gang-banger decides to open fire at you for no reason other than being there." Pressing her lips together, she puts an arm around Ms. James's shoulder and gazes at the carnage of the scene with a disbelieving expression.

"Why?" Emma asks bleakly, the words coming out of her mouth before she can stop them.

The officer shrugs. "Fear? Vengeance?" she guesses. "The need to show dominance and victimize others before it can happen to you? I grew up not too far from here, in Dorchester, and gang violence is pretty standard in both places. The only other options are getting out or living your life in constant fear."

"But you chose a different path," Emma points out.

"Yeah, well, some of us hold onto the crazy idea that we can actually change things. Then stuff like this happens and...I'm not sure anymore."

Shaking her head, she turns to the community center director and asks, "Ms. James, do you think you can look up the kids' contact information for Detective Swan so she can notify their families?"

Still choking back sobs, the older woman nods and beckons Emma and Officer Fa to follow her into the building, and Emma stands frozen for a moment because the reason she's seeking this information suddenly hits her like avalanche.

She has to notify their families.

There are three kids sitting on the bed of the ambulance as Regina approaches: two girls and one boy, wrapped in blankets, their eyes vacant and unseeing as EMTs tend to their wounds. These are the supposed "lucky" ones, the ones who had been out of range of the worst of the gunfire, their injuries too minor to warrant a trip to the hospital.

Yes, aren't they so lucky? Regina thinks. *Lucky to have watched their friends bleed to death right in front of them, unable to stop it.*

The ghosts behind their eyes, ghosts that will remain long after the next act of violence, and the one after that, leave this one a tiny blip on the radar of most people's consciousness, tell a different tale. Perhaps the dead are the lucky ones. They don't have to watch the world continue spinning around them when their worlds have already ended.

She approaches the girl at the end, the one the EMTs have apparently finished with, and arranges her features into the expression she's always adopted when speaking to traumatized survivors: sympathetic without being overly emotional, and absolutely no fake smile. There's nothing more hurtful than a fake smile when your heart has just been ripped out of your chest and crushed into dust before your eyes.

"Hi, my name is Regina," she says softly, reaching out to shake the young girl's hand. "I'm a police officer. Can you tell me your name?"

"Michelle," she rasps.

"Hi, Michelle. Could you tell me about what happened?"

The girl raises her shoulders and gives such a pained expression that Regina longs to reach out and hug her tightly, but she stops herself. She has to stay professional, at least until the questions are over. She's not sure why that's such a struggle for her all of a sudden.

"We were walking to the center for Science Club," she begins slowly. "And then the car drove by. It was driving really slowly, and then they

just started shooting at us. It was really loud. I hid behind that trash can over there," she explains, indicating a large barrel about thirty yards away on the sidewalk. "Then when it was over..." she dissolves in tears as she gazes at the bodies of the friends she had probably been laughing and joking with less than an hour before.

Regina rubs her back sympathetically. "Could you tell me anything about the car?" she asks. "Was it big, small? What color?"

"It was black," Michelle mumbles through her tears. "And just regular-sized, you know? It was just a normal car."

"Like a sedan?" Regina asks.

"Sure."

"Okay, what about the shooter? Or shooters? You said 'they.'"

"I didn't really see," the girl admits. "I just saw the car and heard the gun, and I hid because that's what we learned at school."

"There were two people in the car," the boy next to her interrupts. "I think one was driving and the other was shooting."

"Okay. Did you get a good look at either of them?"

The boy shakes his head. "I think the shooter was a man. Maybe black, but his skin was kind of light. Didn't see who was driving."

"Well, that helps a little," Regina says. "Thank you. What's your name?"

"I'm Kyle, and this is my sister, Andrea," he says, elbowing the girl beside him. She winces even at the light contact. The right side of her shirt is ripped and dirty like she dove onto the ground and landed with a pretty bad skid. She'll probably be bruised tomorrow, Regina notes.

"How about you, Andrea? Did you see anything?" Regina asks.

Andrea shakes her head. She looks younger than the other two – young and terrified. She stares down at her lap and doesn't even attempt to speak.

"Okay," Regina says slowly, reaching out to squeeze Andrea's trembling hand. "Thank you all for your help. We're going to do everything we can to find the people who did this to your friends."

Kyle gives a disbelieving snort, like he doesn't trust her for a second. She supposes he has a right. *How much violence has he seen, even at*

such a young age? she wonders. *And when have cops ever actually kept their word and fixed the problem?*

"I promise," she whispers, with as much sincerity as she can muster because she knows that they're just empty words. Because even though she won't sleep until the perpetrator has been captured and brought to justice, it ultimately won't make a difference. The world will keep turning and people will continue to do terrible things and children will have their innocence ripped away one by one until there's none left.

"So," Nolan mumbles, holding the list of addresses the director had given them far away from his face like he's afraid it's going to bite.

"So," Emma replies.

"Do you want to start from the address closest to the center and work our way out from there?" he asks, and she shrugs in silent agreement. Not that it really matters, because all of the kids lived within a few blocks anyway, but it feels better to have a plan.

Better is a relative term.

The first apartment they visit belongs to Bria, the girl with the science test in her backpack. Nolan raises his fist to tap on the door and pauses, turning to shoot Emma a panicked look which she returns.

"I've never felt more in over my head," he admits. "I keep thinking this is something I'll get used to, but...it just seems to get worse."

Emma nods. She momentarily wishes she was doing this with Regina instead and curses Locksley for separating them, although she's sure he had his reasons for assigning her where he did. Not that being with her real partner would make the situation any better, but she's realizing for the first time just how much Regina's presence steadies and calms her.

Nolan's a good cop, and a good guy, but in this moment he has no idea what he's doing any more than she does.

He exhales harshly and gives the door a tentative knock, and the complete dread in the eyes of the woman who answers is enough to make Emma's heart drop down to the pit of her stomach.

"Hello, I’m Detective David Nolan, and this is Detective Emma Swan," Nolan explains. "We're-"

"You're police," the woman interrupts frantically. "Is this about the shooting on Mildred Ave?"

Emma hears the sound of the TV in the background, turned to a local news show. Through the static, she can make out Locksley's voice urging anyone with information about the shooter to call an anonymous tip line. She can't do this. How do you tell a mother that her eleven year old was gunned down a quarter mile from her home? "Yes," she gulps. "This...are you-"

"My Bria, is she okay?"

"Ms. Lawrence, I'm so sorry. Your daughter-"

She doesn't manage to get any more words out because Bria's mother breaks down, starts wailing the word no over and over, and before Emma knows what's happening, her arms are around the woman and she's desperately trying to soothe her.

It's probably unprofessional and it's definitely futile, and she's never hated her job before, but right now she's fairly certain she'd rather be getting hit by a truck over and over again.

And the knowledge that the woman she's trying and failing to comfort feels much worse does little to help.

"Ma'am, I'm very sorry to have to ask you this," Nolan says quietly, pulling out a clear plastic evidence bag, "but we just need to confirm – is this your daughter's student ID?"

Ms. Lawrence takes one look at the ID card and sobs harder, her tears soaking the shoulder of Emma's most hated blazer, which Nolan takes as a yes. He drops his head and intones, in a way that seems almost practiced, "When you're ready, we'll need you to come down and-" his voice cracks, but he forces himself to continue "-and identify the body. And collect her belongings – her backpack. We...we have a grief counselor at the station you can – should – speak to."

"We're going to do everything we can to find whoever is responsible for this," Emma promises, quoting something she heard Regina say on her first day in homicide. She's never realized before how utterly empty those words sound: what does it matter? Finding the shooter won't bring five dead children back to life.

And the fact that it might prevent future murders is likely cold comfort for the families of those who have already been killed.

Bria's mother has collected herself somewhat. Lifting her head from Emma's shoulder, she sniffles, "She was going there – to the center – to study. She had science club with seventh and eighth graders."

"I saw her science test in her backpack. She was a very talented student."

"She wanted to be a vet. Get out of Mattapan...go to college...do something with her life."

The statement brings on a fresh wave of tears, and Emma feels her own heart break even more. "I'm so sorry," she says again, her voice coming out in a strangled whisper. "I can't even imagine what you must be going through right now."

"Can you come with us to the station?" Nolan asks gently.

Ms. Lawrence nods, following the detectives out the door with a vacant look in her eyes, the look of someone who has lost so much it's unfathomable.

"Do you have kids?" she asks abruptly.

Nolan shakes his head, and Emma swallows hard and says, "Yeah, one. He's ten."

"I tried so hard to keep her safe," the woman mumbles. "But in this neighborhood..."

"You can't," Emma finishes, feeling near tears herself at the recollection of the utter powerlessness that comes with the inability to protect your own child.

And then she curses her own weakness, because she's been privileged enough that those moments have been few and far between, and Henry may be far away from her right now, but he's alive and well and as safe as anyone possibly can be.

She'll call him tonight, whenever she gets a minute, in between telling the parents of the four remaining victims that they'll never get the chance to call their children again.

She wonders if it's too late to back out of this homicide gig.

She wonders if she'd ever forgive herself if she did.

He's never liked naps. That should have been her first clue.

But in the five years he's been alive, Henry has never had anything worse than a slight head cold, so when her son falls asleep on the couch after a busy Saturday morning at the playground, she simply

shrugs it off and starts making preparations for a nutritious meal so Neal can't complain when he comes over later that evening for their "family dinner."

When he's still asleep an hour later, she's slightly concerned, but they had done a lot of running that morning, and he's a growing boy. It's not unreasonable that he would need some rest after all that.

An hour after that, though, she's starting to get really worried, because Henry barely even sleeps for two hours at a time at night, let alone in the middle of the day. The kid has way too much energy and gets excited over every little thing. It's with some trepidation that she approaches the living room couch to gently lay a hand on his forehead, and she instantly panics when she feels his burning-hot skin.

Heart racing, she sprints into the bathroom to find the thermometer she knows is in the medicine cabinet. The fancy ear one that Neal had bought after being scared half to death by an infomercial about meningitis. The one that they've never had to use before.

With shaking hands, she fumbles to get the box open and pulls out the instruction manual, frantically questioning whether the whole thing is in Chinese or if she's simply forgotten how to read English.

She has to calm down.

She takes a deep breath and looks at the diagram and tries to reassure herself that it's simple enough. Turn it on, stick it in his ear, press the button, and wait for the beep. She can do this. She can be a mother. Kids have fevers all the time and they get better: she was always sick when she was younger and look how she turned out. Perfectly fine.

She keeps murmuring the words "perfectly fine" over and over as she waits for the beeping noise to tell her the thermometer is ready.

But once she hears it, she panics again because the reading is 106.

One hundred and six?

How is that even possible?

She runs to the kitchen and opens the freezer, thanking whatever higher power exists in the world that there had been a sale on frozen vegetables at Market Basket that week. She grabs about seven packages of frozen peas and broccoli and piles them on top of Henry's sleeping form, which quickly wakes him up.

"Momma...thirsty," he mumbles.

"Yeah, kid, just wait one second and I'll get you something." Another mad dash into the kitchen, and she pulls out the entire six-pack of

juice boxes she'd bought for his lunch at pre-K. "Drink as many of these as you can," she tells him, poking a straw into the first one for him. "You need to get lots of fluids."

He takes one sip and spits it out. "I hate apple juice!"

Emma sighs. Of all the times to suddenly become a picky eater. "Henry, you love apple juice."

"No! It's poison!" He throws the juice box across the room and bursts into tears. Emma blinks, terribly confused. Is this a fever thing? Is he hallucinating? What the hell is going on?

"Momma, I'm cold," Henry sobs. "Why is there a vegetable mountain on top of me?"

Emma orders him to stay under the ice packs, making up some story about hiding from an evil witch. When he seems to buy it, she breathes a sigh of relief and calls Neal.

"Hey, what's up? " he says immediately, picking up on only the second ring. "I didn't expect to hear from you until tonight. Is everything okay?

"It's...no, it's not okay. Henry is sick."

"He's sick? He never gets sick," Neal says disbelievingly.

"Well, he is. He has a temperature of one-oh-six."

"Wait, what? That's, like, hospital level! How did that even happen? He was fine this morning when I dropped him off, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was!" Emma exclaims. "He was completely fine until a couple of hours ago when he decided to take a nap!"

"A nap?"

"Yeah, I know, but we were running around at the playground all day, so I figured he was just tired and..." Emma trails off, on the brink of tears. She knows that somehow, some way, she must have done something that caused this. It couldn't have been Neal, because he's the perfect responsible parent at all times.

"Okay, well, don't freak out," he says slowly. "We'll just have to get him to the doctor. Your car's out of the shop, right?"

"Yeah," Emma breathes. "Yeah, I'll drive him to the ER right now."

"Somerville Hospital's closest to your place, right? I'll meet you there."

She hangs up and approaches Henry on the couch. "Hey, kid, we have to go to the hospital, okay? I'm gonna carry you to the car now."

"Okay," Henry murmurs. "Momma, it hurts to swallow."

"I know," she says softly, "but the doctors are gonna make it all better."

"And the witch won't catch me?"

"No way, you're safe as long as I'm protecting you," she assures him, wishing she could somehow guarantee her words were true. Henry nods and buries his face in her chest as she clutches him tightly against her, the residual heat from his body making her sweat. She quickly takes his temperature one more time before they leave, it's down to 105. Not great, she thinks, but better than nothing.

She drives as fast as humanly possible to the hospital, where there miraculously isn't too long a wait in the emergency room. Neal jogs in breathlessly just as a bunch of nurses are taking Henry into a room to run some tests. He's acting pretty calm – calmer than her, anyway – but his eyes betray his fear.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"We're about to start a spinal tap," one of the hospital workers helpfully informs them. "To test for meningitis."

"Meningitis?" Neal gasps.

"That's really bad, right?" Emma asks nervously. "How could he have gotten meningitis? He was fine this morning!"

The nurse shrugs. "He could have picked up a bacteria or virus at any point during the last few days and just started showing symptoms now. Does he go to school?"

"Yeah, pre-K, but wouldn't they have told us if there were any bad infections going around?" Neal demands. "Em, did you get any notices from the school this week?"

"No!" she exclaims. "I would have remembered something like that."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," the nurse says, trying to calm the storm she'd inadvertently created. "For all we know, it could be the

flu or strep throat or any other kind of simple infection that just caused a high fever."

"Right, yeah." Neal takes a deep breath and tries to calm down. "We'll just have to wait for the test results."

Emma and Neal watch, terrified, as various medical personnel administer test after test to their son, who in spite of everything seems to be the most composed of any of them. In fact, the second people stop poking and prodding him, he falls asleep almost instantly. Finally, there's nothing left to do but wait.

Henry looks so small on the hospital bed, pale and clammy with IV tubes poking out of his arms. They've been administering fluids to him, and it seems to be working because his temperature is down to 100.

Still not awesome, Emma thinks, but better. She can live with better. Better is good.

Beside her, Neal eventually drifts off to sleep, but Emma can't. She can't stop replaying the morning over and over again, searching for any abnormality that may have pointed to this impending illness, some sign that she could have prevented this.

That Henry is sick because she was a bad mother.

He hadn't eaten a whole lot, she remembers, but his eating habits have always been pretty erratic. He either eats everything in sight or nothing depending on his mood. And his energy level had been normal, maybe even higher than normal.

Kids get sick, she reminds herself. All kids get sick. She's seen at least twenty different kids in this very ER with all manner of infections and bumps and bruises. It happens.

But she should have been able to prevent it from happening to hers.

She continues berating herself for hours until a doctor comes back into the room, clipboard in hand and a reassuring smile on his face. "Good news. Spinal fluid came back clear," he says brightly. "Judging from the state of his throat, it seems like we're just looking at a bad case of strep. The results from the throat culture won't be back for another day or two, but we'll start him on antibiotics right away."

Emma lets out the breath she wasn't aware that she was holding and nudges Neal awake. "It's just strep?" she asks. "Does that usually come with such a high fever?"

The doctor shrugs. "Different people's bodies react differently. I'd like to keep him overnight for observation, but his fever is going down and it looks like he'll be just fine."

He'll be just fine.

Those are the only words she hears as she collapses in tears onto Neal's shoulder. Her ex's stoic expression can't mask his obvious relief, and he awkwardly pats her on the back.

"He'll probably be hungry when he wakes up," he observes. "Maybe I'll go pick up some pizza and popsicles?"

"I bet he'd like that."

Emma doesn't sleep a wink that night, watching over Henry as he breathes more easily and his fever slowly decreases as the antibiotics start working their magic. The next morning, he's discharged with two prescriptions and orders to get some rest. He practically skips out the door, refusing both of his parents' offers to carry him.

This story has a happy ending, Emma thinks, buckling Henry into the backseat just as a morgue van pulls into the hospital parking lot. She hopes they'll always be so lucky.

"Gun's registered to James Marsden of Dedham," Jones says tiredly over the phone. "He reported it stolen a month ago. Nobody ever found it...until now."

"Wonderful," Locksley sighs.

Regina shoots a hopeful glance toward the lieutenant, but he shakes his head. Turning her face away so the twentieth witness she's spoken to in the last hour won't see her scowl, she barks at Officer Fa, "Call down to headquarters and see if they got anything on the tip line."

The younger woman jogs away, and Regina asks again – she can't remember if she's already asked this student or not – "Is there anything distinctive you can remember about the car?"

"The back door was scraped," the boy mentions. "It looked like somebody hit it."

"The back door," Regina writes carefully. "On the passenger's side?" Her witness looks confused, so she clarifies, "The side the shooter was on?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, good. Thank you, Darrell, that's very helpful."

"I noticed 'cause it was a really nice car," he says quietly. "It looked new, and it had that little peace sign on the hood."

"Peace sign..." Regina quickly searches on her phone for an image of the Mercedes logo. "Did it look anything like this."

"Yeah, that's it!"

"Update the description of the getaway vehicle," Regina calls to the officers standing by at the scene. "It's a Mercedes with a scratch on the rear passenger's side door." Then she turns to her young witness with a genuine smile and says, "Thank you so much for your help."

"We got something," Officer Fa hollers a few minutes later. "Patrol units found a car matching the description near Ashmont. Looks like gun residue on the front seat."

"ADA Blanchard, I need a search warrant for that car, ASAP," Regina orders.

"It's parked illegally," Officer Fa reports, still on the phone. "They want to know if they should tow it back to the station or wait and run surveillance."

"No one's going to be dumb enough to come back for it," Locksley cuts in. "Bring it back to the station and dust for prints. See if the crime lab can match the residue to the gun."

"Did Jones and Booth get any prints off the gun?" Regina asks.

"A couple partials, but they don't match the owner and they're not in the system."

"So, what, it's a first time criminal?" Officer Fa asks with raised eyebrows. "Most of the guys who would pull off this kind of shooting have been at it for a while."

"More likely, it was someone who's never been caught," Regina mutters.

Locksley's phone rings, and he glances at the screen with a grimace. "Commissioner. Wonderful. Regina, if anything comes up-"

"I've got it," she replies shortly. Of course she knows what to do, it *should* be her job. Although why she's thinking about that at a time like this, who knows. She looks over her notes again and shakes her head. "I can't wait to get these guys," she remarks to Officer Fa.

The younger woman nods. "I've never been the type to look for revenge, or try to destroy people, or anything like that, but after today, I don't

know."

"Human beings are horrible," Regina declares, "even the good ones."

Officer Fa just stares at her for a moment then says, "You're different than I expected."

"Car's owner has been located," Locksley reports. "It's looking like his son was the driver – Vince Brown. Officers are taking him in now to be questioned."

"Any luck on the shooter?" Regina asks.

"No, we're hoping the driver will give him up. Can you-"

"On my way," she interrupts, fishing for the car keys in her jacket pocket. "Where's my partner?"

"With Nolan, they're still talking to the families."

"Still?" Regina asks, appalled. Locksley shoots her a pained glance that she has to look away from. Of course it's taking a while – two detectives notifying five separate families. "I suppose I could take care of it on my own," she offers reluctantly.

"I'll send Swan down to the station as soon as she's finished," Locksley promises. "Or if you need backup, you can use Jones or Booth."

"I'll do no such thing."

"You won't need to," Emma's voice cuts in. "I'm back."

"Excellent. Swan, go with Mills. See if you can get Brown to give up the shooter. We're charging them both with first degree murder, but if he cooperates...well, either way, he's not getting less than life in prison."

Regina lets out a huff of air and motions of Emma to follow her to the car.

"I gather that Brown is the getaway driver?" the younger detective mumbles.

"That is correct. You look awful," she comments, taking in her partner's haggard appearance. "Are you alright?"

"No," Swan says shortly. "I just told five sets of parents that their kids died. Why, are you?"

"I have over thirteen years in homicide under my belt," Regina points out.

"Does that make it better or worse?"

"You have a point."

Regina starts the car, and Emma abruptly admits, "I wished I had your experience with me today. Nolan is – well, we did okay together, but still. Why would Locksley separate us?"

Regina feels her heart swell at the idea that Emma would have preferred to be with her, even for something so terribly unpleasant, but she quickly squashes the thought because it doesn't even begin to make sense. "I don't always agree with our esteemed lieutenant, but on this I do support him. Can you imagine Detective Jones bumbling through those notifications? You, on the other hand, are a parent, so one would presume you know how to speak to them."

"I don't know about that," Emma sighs. "I mean, is there even a right way to tell someone their child is dead?"

"Well, there's certainly a wrong way," Regina says. "Trust me."

She doesn't elaborate, and Emma doesn't pry. The blond is fidgety on the car ride, tapping her fingers against the window and compulsively putting her hair up and down. Finaly, she stops when her phone dings with an email notification.

"The case?" Regina asks.

"Yeah, information about the alleged driver, Vince Brown."

"What have we got?"

"His prints were on the wheel, and maybe the gun. It's only a partial match. The car is his father's, but he was driving it today. No alibi. They're getting photos of the car to the eyewitnesses now. He's nineteen, rich white kid, graduated from a fancy prep school but 'taking time off' before college."

"Probably a world-class idiot who spent the entire time drinking," Regina snorts. "I bet Daddy donated a new football field so he wouldn't fail out."

"Jones says he and Booth are coming up blank on any connections to the neighborhood that would provide a motive."

"It doesn't make sense," Regina agrees. "We've been operating on the assumption that this was gang-related, but why would a privileged white kid drive through the ghetto, shooting people from his father's Mercedes?"

Emma shrugs. "Don't ask me about what rich kids do for fun."

The two women drive the rest of the way to the station in silence.

The suspect is sitting in the interrogation room next to an older man who resembles him so closely that he must be his father.

"Looks like a punk," Emma comments, looking at the boys' outfit with distaste. "Who is he trying to be, Macklemore? What kind of dad wouldn't tell his kid to change?"

When no response comes from Regina, Emma turns to see that her partner's face has gone completely ashen.

"You know him?" she guesses.

"My mother tried to set me up with him. The father, not the son," she quickly clarifies.

Emma gags. "Not like that's any less gross. He looks, like, sixty-five or something. And not in a silver fox kind of way."

"My mother is clinically insane."

"Does this mean we have to be nice to him?" Emma asks. "I mean, since he's a rich family friend and all."

"He's responsible for five deaths. I don't care who he is," Regina says harshly. She thrusts open the door, taking both father and son by surprise.

"Mr. Brown, you are a legal adult, so there is no need for your father to be present for the interrogation."

"I'm his legal counsel," the older man insists. "And hello to you, too, Regina."

"First of all," Regina interrupts, voice cold with fury, "you will address me as Detective Mills. Second, given the charges against your son, you might consider hearing what we have to say before you give him more insipid legal advice."

"What are you offering?"

"Offering? I'm not offering anything. I'm merely informing you that we have your *client's* prints in the car, eyewitnesses who saw it at the crime scene, no stolen vehicle report, no alibi, *and* gunpowder on your client's pants," she finishes, pointing out the residue staining the right leg of the suspect's jeans.

His father flinches, obviously berating himself for not thinking of telling his moronic son to change clothes. "So?" he asks.

"So, your client is charged with five counts of first degree murder. That's life without parole. Unless, of course, there's solid evidence that someone else pulled the trigger."

"Then what?" the boy asks eagerly, and Emma wants to slap him.

"That depends."

The father whispers something in his son's ear. "Drop the charges to manslaughter," he demands.

At that, Emma explodes. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" she screams. "You helped shoot five innocent children. You're fucking lucky our state doesn't have the death penalty because-"

"Detective Swan, may we talk outside?" Regina interrupts in a strained tone. Emma snaps out of her rage with a start when she realizes that the senior detective is tugging on her arm, which is drawn back and ready to punch Brown in the face.

Without waiting for an answer, Regina tugs her out the door and hisses, "What are you thinking?"

"I-"

"You can't explode on suspects like that when they're about to cooperate! You could have screwed this up for us."

"I-"

"I know today has been tough, and I'm sure this case is hitting you on a personal level. I understand that, but you need to hold it together on the job, or you shouldn't be here. Go take a walk, get it out of your system, and I'll finish this up."

"But-"

"Go!"

Emma takes one look at her partner's unyielding expression, murmurs, "Okay," and flees down the hall.

Regina finds her partner half an hour later, punching a wall in an empty interrogation room.

"I'm sorry," Emma says quickly. "I lost my cool back there. It won't happen again."

"It will; you'll just learn to control it by taking up boxing or something. Some kind of safe outlet for your rage."

"You mean like making bitchy comments to your coworkers?" Emma remarks.

Regina's face falls. "Yes, exactly," she tries to joke. *Is that really what Emma thinks?* she wonders. But then, what does she care if her coworkers think she's bitchy? She does her job; that's all that matters. She's not there to win Miss Congeniality.

"I just...he made me so angry. He killed five kids and doesn't think anything of it, and I spent the afternoon talking to their families, and-" voice cracking, she breaks off, looking dangerously close to tears.

"I know, and he's – well, he gave us what we needed, but he's not getting any deals. I don't care if I have to hold a gun to Blanchard's head; she's not pulling any of her rehabilitation crap on this one."

"I don't think she will," Emma says. "This case hit her hard, too. But isn't it kind of ironic that you're telling me not to hit people and then five seconds later talking about holding a gun to Mary Margaret's head?"

"Talking about it, not doing it. It's different." Regina sighs. "One thing you'll quickly learn, if you haven't already, is that standards of police brutality are different for us. If a male cop punches a suspect, he gets a slap on the wrist, maybe anger management classes depending on how IAB is feeling that day. But if a female cop does it, suddenly we're hormonal and hysterical and not emotionally fit to be in the line of duty."

"Sexism sucks," Emma groans. "Anyway, Brown gave up the shooter?"

"He says it's some gang member named Tony – no last name, but we got an address. Units are picking him up as we speak. Of course, now Brown is demanding police protection for turning him in."

"Are we going to give it to him?"

"Locksley's call. We do need him to stay alive long enough to testify, but...once he's in prison – and he *will* go to prison – who knows what will happen? Anyway, it seems unlikely that this Tony is important enough to warrant Brown fearing for his life."

Emma shrugs, eyes distant. "I just don't understand how a person could do something like this," she says quietly. "They would need to have, like, no conscience or something."

"Evil," Regina murmurs. Her phone dings as a text from Nolan comes in, and she turns to her partner and asks, "Do you think you can handle an interrogation with gang-banger Tony?"

The detectives have all returned to the squad room, but the atmosphere is solemn, filled with none of the usual humor and camaraderie. Instead, it's as though a dark, cold fog fills the air, unseen but deeply felt. *Like dementors*, Emma thinks, recalling the Harry Potter books she used to read to Henry before bed. She stares at her lap, unwilling to meet the eyes of her coworkers, but a quick, stolen glance upward confirms that they are all doing the same.

It's Jones who breaks the silence first, muttering, "Case closed," in a tone entirely devoid of satisfaction.

"That was fast," remarks Mary Margaret. Emma briefly wonders what the ADA is still doing there before realizing that no one wants to be alone right now. "It's only 9:30."

Nolan shrugs. "Shooting in broad daylight, dozens of witnesses – pretty open and shut case."

"Right," Locksley says tiredly, poking his head out through his office door, "and I want everyone to go home. Arraignments are at nine in the

morning. Paperwork can wait until tomorrow; you all need to rest and clear your heads. No exceptions," he adds with a firm stare directed toward the only detective who would protest such an order.

Emma watches her partner's face carefully. Under normal circumstances, she would expect anger, or at least irritation, but she sees neither. The change is barely perceptible, but it's there. Regina looks defeated, and Emma understands the feeling all too well right now.

She doesn't particularly want to go home, herself. It's not like she has anyone to return to; although for once, she's actually glad Henry is in New York. She has no idea how she would even begin to tell him about her day; she's not sure she's ever felt further from the hero he believes her to be. For just a second, she thinks that maybe she could invite Regina over, that they could ride out the pain and despair together, but she quickly pushes that idea out of her head. They're nowhere near close enough for that, and Regina likely has her evening routine all worked out, with no room for disturbances.

"Anyone interested in getting a drink together," Jones suggests bleakly. Emma lets out a humorless snort – he would suggest alcohol at a time like this. But she supposes it might not be the worst idea ever, getting drunk enough to forget.

Nolan exchanges a glance with the ADA and raises one shoulder. "Sure, it beats drinking alone. Swan, Mills, Locksley, you in?"

The lieutenant shakes his head. "I've got to get home."

"I'll go, I guess," Emma says noncommittally. The two male detectives nod and turn toward the door without waiting for Regina's response, which is sure to be negative.

"We can take my car," Blanchard offers. "It's down in the garage from this morning." She exits the squad room with Jones and Nolan, but Emma hangs back for a moment to talk to her partner.

"You want to come?" she offers.

Regina forces a smile that more closely resembles a grimace. "You know my policy on drinking with idiots. Why make a terrible day worse?"

"Okay, just checking," Emma replies weakly. "Have a good – well, have a not-too-awful night."

"Thank you, dear. You too, and make sure our moronic colleagues don't get themselves into too much trouble."

"Will do," the blonde promises, turning to leave.

She's about to walk out the door when Regina calls after her, "Emma! I...if you need anything, you have my number."

Emma raises an eyebrow in surprise. "Thanks," she says sincerely. "Right back at ya. And, um...are you planning on running tomorrow morning?"

"I'll be there at the usual time and place. Will I see you then?"

Emma flashes her partner a small smile before jogging out the door.

Chapter 7

Regina watches the door for a long time after Emma walks out of it. Then she sighs and stares at her desk, wondering if perhaps she should have followed. If maybe she could have shelved her pride just this once and spent unnecessary time with her coworkers instead of returning to her apartment alone with nothing but pain and liquor to keep her company.

But no, she's going home.

She's going to sleep in her own apartment tonight and pretend that she doesn't have ghosts as her bedmates.

She's going to, but she still hasn't left her chair by the time Locksley shuts the door to his office. She doesn't even notice that he's standing over her until he clears his throat awkwardly and snaps her out of her contemplation of wood patterns.

"I'm...I was just leaving," she mutters defensively, voice unusually raspy with fatigue and grief.

"Right, of course you were."

"I wasn't going to disobey the orders of my commanding officer."

"I know." He makes no movement toward the door.

"I can find my way out of here on my own. You don't have to babysit me."

"Never said I was."

"Okay, well, goodnight."

He still doesn't budge.

"What?" Regina demands.

"It's...um..." he looks down, almost as if he's embarrassed. "Roland's at Marian's parents' house tonight, but I was thinking I would go get him, and-"

Regina rolls her eyes and interrupts. "That's perfectly understandable, but you hardly need me to validate your plans."

"I thought maybe he'd like to see his Auntie Regina, and maybe you'd like-"

"I'd like what?"

"Company."

"I don't need company."

"I never said 'need.' I said 'would like.' It's different."

"Well, I neither want nor need *your* company, but I suppose Roland is tolerable," Regina muses. There are voices in her head telling her that this is a horrible idea, that opening this can of worms again will only end in disaster, but there are other voices, strong ones, telling her that she needs this.

It's those voices, the ones telling her that just once she deserves not to be alone, that win out.

She gets up and follows him to the car.

Regina sits quietly in the passenger seat, fidgeting with the engagement ring she wears on a chain around her neck, uncertain and perhaps, if she's willing to let herself actually feel for a moment, slightly frightened of what will happen next. She shouldn't have come; hanging out with Locksley in times of emotional duress never ends well for her.

Robin seems to be having the same thoughts on the driver's side. He's still flipping between radio stations and muttering to himself. Finally, he settles on the Red Sox game and leans back uneasily in his seat.

"What? No football?" Regina asks.

He gives her a disbelieving stare. "It's not football season. Buckle your seatbelt."

Right, it's not football season. She knew that.

"So," she mumbles as they pull out of the parking garage, "how are Marian's parents these days?"

"They...they're fine." He looks like he wants to say something else, but he stops himself. "They're fine," he repeats.

"I imagine that spending time with Roland is helpful for them."

He smiles at that. "Yes, well, who doesn't like Roland?"

"Who doesn't?" Regina echoes, staring out the window. She has to admit she admires Robin for staying so close to Marian's parents. It's not easy – she hasn't spoken to Daniel's mother since his memorial service. But, then again, the situations are different. There's Roland. She wonders, if the baby had survived...

No, she can't think about that. Not tonight. Not when everything is already so raw.

Five dead children. Five families torn apart. Dozens of innocents scarred for life from watching their friends die right in front of them. Shot by some fucking punk asshole because he was bored.

It kind of makes her own pain pale in comparison.

"You didn't go to the bar with the others," Robin abruptly observes.

"No, I didn't, or I wouldn't be in your car right now. Obviously."

"I'm just...well, no, not surprised, but I thought maybe you might have wanted to keep an eye on Swan. After today, I mean."

"You think she can't handle a few drinks on her own?"

"No," he says carefully, "I just heard that she had a hard time today, questioning the suspect, and then with the nature of the case, and knowing how you feel about her-"

"How I feel about her?"

"You're...protective. I mean, it makes sense," he adds hurriedly. "She's a rookie, she's the only other woman in the unit, you two seem friendly-"

"She's a good partner. And yes, I look out for her, but Emma is a grown woman. She can take care of herself off the job."

Can she? asks the needling voice in her head. If she and Locksley can barely keep it together with all of their experience dealing with their emotions on the job, what is it going to be like for a rookie? A rookie with a child of her own who she seems to spend about ninety-five percent of her time worrying about. And she's with Nolan and Jones, who – well, as much as Regina treats them like they don't have enough brain cells to feel deeply, obviously they do. They're human. This case is affecting everybody.

She should have gone.

No, she shouldn’t have. Emma has told her before that she doesn’t appreciate her protection. She's an adult who can handle her own demons.

She still should have gone, though, but maybe not just for Emma's benefit.

Lost in thought, she doesn't even notice that they've already changed neighborhoods. Robin parks the car in front of a dimly-lit 1970's style house that still looks the same as it did twelve years ago when they all came to Thanksgiving dinner here and she and Daniel and Marian and Robin simultaneously announced their engagements.

"You want to come in and say hi?" he offers.

"I – no. I don't think they really like me," she fumbles.

Robin rolls his eyes. "They like you just fine, but suit yourself. I'll be back in five."

He slams the door and jogs up the front steps, and Regina leans back with a tired sigh. She remembers the last time she was in this house, after Roland's christening. She and Robin had been called out on a case right as the party was about to start, and they had promised to redo the celebration at a later date. But then it kept getting postponed, and postponed, and then Marian had died and nothing seemed to matter much anymore.

She wonders if they still have the cake in the freezer.

Robin comes out five minutes later, as promised, carrying Roland and a Big Bird backpack. The little boy's face lights up in surprise and excitement when he sees her in the car, and she forces herself to smile and wave to him.

"Auntie Gina!" he exclaims, crawling across the backseat and diving into her waiting arms. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello to you, too," she chuckles.

"She's coming over to see you," Robin says with a wink. "Like a playdate."

"A playdate? But it's nighttime!"

"Well, I have to work all day, like your Daddy," Regina explains, "so this was the only time I could play. But if you'd rather I didn't come over..."

"No!" Roland wraps his tiny arms around her neck. "I want you to come! I was just s'prised."

"Okay, young man, let's get you buckled in so we can go home and play," Robin orders.

"I don't have bedtime tonight?"

"Not tonight. You can stay up and play with Auntie Regina for as long as you want."

He'll regret that in the morning, Regina thinks, but she understands the sentiment.

"What did you do with your grandparents today?" Regina asks as Robin starts the car again.

"We played at the dog park!" Roland says excitedly. "I got to see Bobo again and play catch! Then we went to the library. I got five books; you can read me them tonight."

"All five? Tonight?"

"You can do it. You're a good reader. Daddy, when can we get a dog? He can be Bobo's friend."

"I thought you're Bobo's friend."

He beams with pride. "I am, but I'm a people friend. He needs dog friends, too."

"Well, maybe Bobo's owner can work on getting him some dog friends, but that's not something we can do right now, Roland. You know that."

"Who's Bobo?" asks Regina.

"Rescue pit bull Roland met at the dog park. He's a little obsessed."

"He used to be really sick and grumpy," Roland pipes up. "But now he's better. He's my friend."

"I bet you're a really good friend to him," Regina tells the little boy. "Why would he need dog friends when he has you?"

"Because dogs need dog friends!" Roland exclaims, heaving an exaggerated sigh at the stupidity of adults. "And people need people friends, or they get lonely. I don't want Bobo to be lonely."

"I'm sure Bobo isn't lonely," Robin says firmly. "And you know that we can't get a dog. Let's talk about something else now."

Regina mouths, "Sorry," and Robin shrugs. "Tell me more about those books I'm supposed to read," she tries. That does the trick. Roland babbles about dragons and magic and knights with swords for the rest of the drive, and Regina leans her head against the window and half-listens, half-ruminates on the strangeness of her current situation.

When they arrive at the Locksleys' apartment, Roland sprints up the stairs in front of the two adults, giggling gleefully and clutching his backpack full of books.

"He's certainly happy," Regina remarks.

"Yeah, well, it's not every day he gets to ignore his bedtime and hang out with his favorite godmother."

"I'm reasonably sure I'm his only godmother, unless there's something you're not telling me."

"Regina, if this is too hard for you – I mean, after today-"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm perfectly capable of reading bedtime stories to a young child – my emotional state isn't that fragile," Regina snaps, just as Roland is calling, "Daddy, Auntie Gina, hurry up!" from the front door.

"Besides," she adds softly, "at least *someone* deserves to be happy tonight."

She settles in next to Roland on his bed. He presses his small, warm body against hers and gazes adoringly up at her face as she pulls a fleece blanket lightly over their legs and opens the first book.

Robin perches at the edge of the bed, on his son's other side, and she's about to start reading when his phone rings. Regina and Roland watch carefully as the lieutenant's face grows redder and more annoyed the more the person on the other end speaks.

Finally, he hangs up and scowls. "Commissioner."

"Did something come up?"

"I have to talk to some reporters. The case...says it will help raise awareness about gun violence in Mattapan."

Regina checks her watch and raises an eyebrow. "It's past ten."

"Yeah, it's for the eleven o'clock news. I-" he looks helplessly at Roland and Regina sighs.

"Go, we're okay," she says reassuringly. "Right, Roland?"

The little boy nods importantly and repeats, "We're okay." Robin chuckles and kisses his son's forehead.

"I'll be back before you know it," he promises. "You take good care of Auntie Regina, alright? Don't let her get into any trouble."

Roland smirks and sticks his thumb in his mouth, nestling into Regina's chest as she starts reading from a picture book about a baby dragon who can't fly. She pulls her knees up to rest the book on them so she can wrap her arm around his tiny shoulders. He seems to sense, in the way that small children do, that she needs him close, and presses himself even tighter into her side. Maybe it's weak of her to turn to a four year old for comfort, but right now, she doesn't care.

Emma fires off dart after dart, hoping that letting out her aggression on an old piece of cork will somehow take her mind of this nightmare of a day. But even after besting all challengers – the veteran male cops are a little bitter, to say the least – she still feels the same.

This isn't why she became a cop. She wanted to help people, not show up at their doorstep and tell them their children are dead. That's the opposite of helpful.

But then again, dead is beyond help.

Jones passes her another shot and she drinks it down immediately. She's not drunk yet – he is, but that's a different story – but she imagines she will be before the night is through. The bar feels different tonight; the air feels thicker, the lights darker. Jones and Nolan are sitting solemnly at the bar, staring at their glasses and not speaking. Beside them, Mary Margaret is playing with her straw and blinking repeatedly like she's trying not to cry.

Emma ducks out the door and pulls her phone from her pocket. Thankfully, Neal picks up right away.

"Hey, is everything okay?" he asks worriedly. "It's kind of late."

"It's...um..." Emma checks her watch and sighs. It's eleven. Henry's probably already in bed, or at least he should be. "Rough day," she admits. "Just wanted to check in, make sure everything is okay over there."

"Yeah, we're good. Henry's fine – no school, obviously, so he spent most of the day writing with Grace, and then we went for a bike ride."

Emma nods. Her voice catches in her throat as she tries to reply; she wishes, more than anything, that Henry was still in Boston. That she could leave this bar and go home and watch him sleep and see for her own eyes that he's safe and happy.

"How's their epic story coming along?" she finally asks.

"I'm not sure; I wasn't allowed to see their progress. But there are about fifteen new documents saved to my desktop, so I imagine it's going well."

"Cool," Emma mumbles. Then, so quietly she doesn't think Neal will even hear her, "I miss him."

He does hear. "It's been less than twenty-four hours," he points out reasonably. "You went this long without seeing him even when we all lived in Boston."

Emma feels a flare of white-hot anger in the pit of her stomach. "You know what, Neal?" she snaps. "Why don't you tell me how you feel the next time you go a month without seeing your kid – oh, wait, you don't have to!"

"What? I – Em, you said you were okay with the move to New York. And it's not like you can't come visit whenever you want to. We have a foldout couch and everything."

"I said I was okay because I didn't have much of a choice!" Emma explodes. "What the hell was I supposed to say?"

"Em, I didn't –"

"I can't do this right now. Just – just go give Henry a kiss for me and be grateful that you're not one of the five parents whose lives I had to destroy today by telling them their children got gunned down in broad daylight."

"Em-"

"Middle school students, Neal! Only a couple of years older than Henry. Walking a few blocks from their school to their community center. So, just...don't!"

Emma storms back into the bar and plops onto the stool next to Jones, slamming her phone hard on the counter. He passes her a shot of rum, which she drinks quickly before ordering another.

"Phone do something to piss you off?" he inquires.

"Just the person at the other end of it."

"Significant other?"

"*Ex*-significant other, of about ten years." Jones raises an eyebrow. "He's my son's father, and he has custody. So...yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"I mean, we're not – we get along okay," Emma clarifies, feeling vaguely guilty for saying anything against Neal when he's done

absolutely nothing but be there for Henry when she couldn't be. It's hardly his fault that he's a man and she's a lesbian. "He's...he's not a bad guy or anything."

"I can't imagine the court would have awarded him custody if he was."

"Yeah, he's a good dad."

"That's rare, isn't it? For fathers to get custody," Jones muses, and Emma's face pales as her fingers tighten around her glass. He glances at her expression and seems to immediately realize his error. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," Emma snaps, downing another shot. "It's also rare for mothers to be homicide detectives."

"That's true. I don't think anyone else in our unit has kids, except Locksley, of course. Even the old guard – did they, Dave?"

"No," Nolan mutters. "Pretty sure they're all planning to die alone."

"There you go," Jones says with a humorless chuckle. "Something to look forward to. Unless Mills has kids, but I don't believe she does."

"She doesn't."

Jones shrugs. "I was partners with that woman for six months and all I know about her is that she takes her coffee black, dresses well, and doesn't have much of a sense of humor."

"She likes running," Emma offers. "And...she kind of has a sense of humor. Sometimes." She does know a bit more information about Regina's life, but she doesn't share it. It somehow seems disloyal even though Jones could look it up on the Internet just as easily as she had.

"Yes, well, we've already established that Her Majesty likes you. That will make your life in homicide easier, although it certainly won't take the sting out of cases like these."

"Is there anything that does?"

Locksley's voice sounds from behind them, "I've yet to discover anything that actually works, although alcohol seems to offer a temporary solution at times."

"I thought you were going home," Nolan remarks.

The lieutenant sighs. "I did. Then I got a call to do an interview for the eleven o'clock news. I was informed that I was there to draw attention

to the increasing gun violence in Boston, especially in Dorchester and Mattapan, but apparently the reporters were informed that I was there to gossip about the rich and famous."

"That sucks," mutters Emma, banging her glass against the bar in frustration.

"It does. My wife grew up in Mattapan, you know, not too far from where today's shooting happened. I had hoped...well, anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm going home now."

"You sure you don't want a drink, Lieutenant?" Jones asks, gesturing to the bartender to bring another round of rum.

"No, I've got to get – I really just came to check on everyone. I'll see you all tomorrow morning, hopefully not too hungover? Blanchard, I assume you're prepared for the arraignments? I don't want that scum let back on the streets."

"We'll be seeking remand," the ADA says quietly, her first words of the evening.

"Excellent." Locksley leans over and slips her a fifty dollar bill. "Make sure these clowns take cabs home, alright?"

She thinks he leaves after that, but she's not sure because she's too busy tipping back her glass and hating the fact that Locksley gets to go home to his kid and she's...well, here.

Roland falls asleep about halfway through story number three. Regina keeps reading for a few minutes, just to ensure that he's fully out, but he doesn't stir. She could stay like this forever, she thinks, watching him sleep so peacefully. He'd climbed onto her lap sometime during story number two, holding the book for her so she could focus on hugging him, one hand running lightly through his unruly and far-too-long hair. She feels his breath, long and slow, rustling her shirt as she watches his tiny chest rise and fall.

It was never supposed to be like this, she thinks. Roland was supposed to have a mother and siblings and an Uncle Daniel and family friends who were close enough to be siblings. He's happy enough the way things are, shuttled between his grandparents and his stressed out single dad and whatever friends Robin can get to help out in a pinch – he's never known anything else – but she can't help but look at him and think about the life he could have had.

The life he deserved.

The life they all deserved.

Suddenly, his embrace feels suffocating. Slowly, gently, and so very carefully, she lifts the little boy off of her lap and lies him on his pillow, nudging a stuffed animal into his arms so he won't notice the lack of contact. Thankfully, he barely blinks, and she tugs the blanket up to his chin before softly kissing his cheek.

He's smiling in his sleep – he always has ever since he was a baby - and she allows her finger to trace along the path of his dimples before standing up to check all the doors and windows of the apartment, gun in hand. Because Roland is the last bright spot left in the lives of their little group, the last reminder on a much happier past, and she'll be damned if she lets any harm come to him.

She finds one unlocked window in Robin's bedroom. It's near the fire escape, too – what the hell is he thinking? She reminds herself to have words with him about his lack of attention to safety before realizing that he might not actually want her in here.

It's not as though she hasn't been in his bedroom before. She's even slept here – spent her first few weeks out of the hospital nestled in between him and Marian while they tried, unsuccessfully, to soothe her through seemingly endless nightmares. *It was probably good practice for Roland*, she thinks wryly. But a lot has changed since then.

No, a lot has changed for Robin since then. Everything is the same for Regina; she's just better at keeping it inside.

The bedroom looks the same, though, except that the bed is neatly made like no one ever sleeps on it. It's the same as hers, in that way. It looks like a shrine to a person and a life that no longer exist. There's even a bottle of Marian's perfume, still sitting on the bedside table like it's just waiting for her to come back from some errands. Regina sprays a tiny squirt of it into the air and sniffs. It smells like wildflowers.

On her wedding day, Marian had worn a crown of daisies. The wedding had been up in Vermont, in a sunny meadow beside a forest, and the day before, Marian and Regina had gone out to gather the bouquets, frolicking barefoot through the grass like a couple of little girls and braiding flowers into each other's hair. It was a good day – a good weekend. The last happy memory she has of the four of them before the unthinkable happened.

There's a picture from the wedding, she remembers, in Roland's room. Almost all the pictures of Marian have been moved there, to a special spot on the bookshelf, because Roland likes to look at his Mama but Robin usually tries to avoid it.

Doing her best to stay silent, she shuts the door to Robin's room and returns to Roland's. He's still sound asleep.

She takes the picture in her hands, holding it reverently like the priceless object it is. She has the same one in her own apartment, but it's

tucked into a corner and she almost always averts her eyes when she passes it. Now, she's looking hungrily, grasping for any sense of reality from a past that feels like it was another lifetime.

They look so young, she marvels. She barely recognizes herself, smiling brightly at the camera without a single worry line marring her rounded face. Despite being significantly heavier – she was six months pregnant at the time – she looks lighter, carefree. Not yet weighed down with a world of pain. Robin, too. It's amazing how much he's aged in the past couple of years. Even Marian, by the time she'd died, hadn't looked quite as youthful as she does in this photo.

And Daniel – well, he never got the chance to look older. He had died only five days later. And with him had died that version of Regina.

Regina takes a long sip of her lemonade and quickly smooths her dress down as the breeze attempts to pick it up yet again and expose her to the entire crowd at the reception. Leave it to the Locksleys to pick the windiest day of the summer to get married in a shelterless meadow. She's never been the biggest fan of dresses – they're not particularly comfortable for chasing down suspects and they remind her of when her mother used to dress her – but she's developed a reluctant appreciation for them as her pregnancy has progressed.

There's something to be said for a garment that doesn't squeeze around the middle.

"And now, for their first dance as husband and wife, I present Robin and Marian Locksley!" Daniel announces with uncharacteristic flair. He may have started a little early on the champagne, Regina thinks with a chuckle. He's been overexcited about this wedding for the last three weeks, dubbing it a "practice session" for their own. Never mind that they haven't even picked a date yet - the impending birth of their child provides a rather important distraction.

Grinning, he hands the microphone to Robin's high school friend John and makes his way over to where she's standing in wait, her own smile so wide it's starting to make her face hurt. "See, I told you I would make a great DJ," he brags, distracting her with a kiss on the nose as he swipes the lemonade out of her hands.

"Yes, you said one sentence into a microphone. Well done, dear," she deadpans, but she can't keep a tiny giggle from escaping as he presses their foreheads together and starts singing along to the opening lines of "I Got You Babe."

"Stop," she hisses, playfully smacking his arm. "You'll ruin their first dance with your awful singing."

"Not a chance," he laughs. "Look at those two idiots. I don't think they even know there's anyone else on the planet right now. I'd almost say they're adorable if they hadn't stolen our song." It's true –

Regina's breath catches in her throat as her heart melts at the pure love shining from both Marian and Robin's eyes.

"We're going to look just like that at ours," Daniel whispers in her ear, lacing their fingers together so he can play with the engagement ring that's recently gotten quite a bit snugger. "But with a different song, now, obviously."

"Maybe we shouldn't worry about picking a song when we don't even have a wedding date," Regina points out.

"So, let's set one and start planning this thing!" Daniel says enthusiastically. "My only requirement is that it's not so damn windy."

"Daniel," Regina whispers, "not today, please?" She looks down at the bump that seems to be growing bigger by the day and rubs one hand against the spot the baby's been kicking repeatedly all afternoon.

"I know you want to wait," he says sympathetically, "but once the baby's born, we'll be so busy taking care of him, and then you'll eventually go back to work and have even less time, and then we'll find something else to keep us busy, and then..."

"Daniel," she says again, lifting her hands to cup his cheeks and staring pleadingly into his soft blue eyes, "you know I want nothing more than to marry you, I just..."

"I know." He deposits the lemonade glass on the nearest table and runs his fingertips gently up and down her arms. "And as much as I enjoy giving you a hard time, you know it doesn't matter to me at all. I'm going to stick with you no matter how long it takes to make it official." His gaze never wavering from hers, he tugs her left hand towards his lips and tenderly kisses each fingertip before repeating the same action with the right. "I love you, and I'm in this for the long haul."

"Me, too," she husks, her voice barely a whisper as she fights back tears. "I love you so much." Wrapping her arms around the back of his neck, she rocks onto her toes and presses a soft kiss onto his lips. He smiles and reaches around to rub her back, and she hums softly, safe and warm and content in his embrace.

They're forced to break apart when the other guests start applauding as the closing notes of Sonny and Cher fade away. Robin takes an overly dramatic bow, and Marian rolls her eyes and pretends to slap him.

"Those crazy kids," Daniel mutters.

"Everyone feel free to join us on the dance floor," Marian says when John hands her the microphone. Robin snatches it away and adds, "That includes our best man and maid of honor, if they're not too busy making out in the corner like a bunch of teenagers."

Regina blushes, and Daniel offers her his hand and asks with affected formality, "May I have this dance?"

"I don't know, I was kind of enjoying making out in the corner like teenagers," she grumbles, but she allows Daniel to twirl her around as they make their way toward their friends.

"So, do pregnancy hormones make all women absurdly touchy-feely, or is it just you?" Robin asks when they get closer.

Marian elbows him in the ribs and, smirking, announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, my husband and his amazing social skills."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Daniel laughs. "Although I must say I'm quite enjoying her newfound touchy-feely side. It makes up for the increased crankiness."

"Shut up and hold me!" Regina whines before bursting into laughter.

"The lady has spoken, Daniel," Robin declares. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I believe I'm supposed to take my mother-in-law for a twirl. This should be interesting."

"Well, shall we?" Daniel asks, sliding his arms around her waist and swaying them in time to the next sappy slow song Robin and Marian

have selected. Sighing happily, she leans against him and loses herself in the moment and in his love.

There's a break in the music when the guests all gather around to watch Robin and Marian cut the cake, and Regina looks up at her fiancé and says, "Daniel, I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?" he asks, slinging an arm around her shoulders as they walk sedately over to their table.

"For being so...you know."

"Uncertain?"

Regina looks down. "I'm certain about you," she murmurs. "It's just everything else."

He stops her, takes both of her hands, and squeezes tightly. "You're going to be a great mother," he promises.

"You don't know that."

"I do know that."

"Daniel..."

"Everything is going to be fine," he says with quiet confidence. "Everything."

"You always say that."

"And I've always been right, so maybe you should trust me for once in your life."

"I do trust you," protests Regina.

"But?" he prompts. "There's a 'but' in there somewhere."

"I don't know," Regina says in a whisper, turning away as a few droplets leak softly out of her eyes. "I don't know."

"You don't trust yourself," Daniel says knowingly, "but that's okay, because I trust you enough for the both of us."

"Daniel-"

"You're going to be an amazing mother, and we're both going to love baby Henry so much, and he's going to be safe and happy always, even if he does end up taking after you and your worrying nature."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I am."

Regina shakes her head. "But the future is-"

"The future is in the future." Daniel cuts her off and presses a kiss to her temple. "For now, let's just focus on enjoying this wedding, okay? I won't mention ours again until you bring it up first."

Nestling into Daniel's chest, Regina allows a few tears to fall – his suit is getting dry-cleaned tomorrow anyway – and whispers, "I love you so much."

"I love you, too, and I believe in you. Even if you don't."

"I want to," Regina chokes out. "I want to believe."

"I know," he says softly. "And someday, you will."

Hours of dancing and toasts and cake eating later, Regina is exiting the restroom when Daniel pops up next to her and wraps her in his arms again. The night air has grown cooler, even in the middle of June, and she welcomes his warmth gladly, snuggling comfortably against his chest.

"Hey, the park rangers are saying everyone has to get out soon so they can set up for the school group tomorrow. Want to have one last dance before we go?"

Regina winces. She'd like nothing more than to dance the night away with him, but her feet and back are killing her, and, if she's being honest with herself, she needs to lie down. Before she even has to reply, Daniel kisses the top of her forehead and says, "It's okay. Let's wish the Locksleys safe travels and head home."

She inhales sharply as he swings around and hoists her up, but once the shock has worn off and she's certain he can support her weight, she happily relaxes into him, serenaded by the chirping of crickets and the strong beat of his heart. She's practically asleep by the time they get to the car, and the only thought in her mind as she drifts off is how much she loves this man and how lucky she is to spend the rest of her life with him.

"I've always liked that picture," Locksley remarks, and Regina jumps nearly three feet in the air.

"Robin!" she gasps, heart pounding so hard she's afraid her chest might explode, leaving angry red stains all over the eggshell carpet. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Yeah, that was obvious. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"It's fine," Regina replies, in what she hopes is a breezy tone. "How was the press conference? Seems like it went...quickly."

"I called it off. Assholes kept fishing for gossip about the senator and that creep Glass and didn't even remember that five children were brutally murdered today."

"Of course," Regina mutters. "Who cares about a couple more dead ghetto kids?" Her eyes briefly drift upwards toward Robin's face to see how intently he's staring his wedding photo – at Marian. She had grown up in that neighborhood, Regina remembers. Perhaps she had even gone to that very community center. "Robin, I-"

"I stopped by the bar briefly to check on the others," he says abruptly. "Nolan, Jones, Swan...they're in a pretty bad way."

Regina sighs. Of course they are. She'd prefer to be blacked-out, herself, and she's almost certain Locksley would, too. "You could have stayed, you know," she offers. "I'm fine with watching Roland, if you want to go out and get a drink."

"I want to get several, but I didn't invite you over to my house for free babysitting."

"Oh?" What on earth does that mean? Her mind is racing – what does he hope to get out of this? They've tried comfort sex before, and it went poorly. Extremely poorly. "Why...why did you invite me over, then?" she asks slowly, hoping her voice doesn't waver.

"I was hoping we could talk, the way we used to. Like friends."

"Friends?"

"Yes, we used to be friends, remember?" he asks, gesturing to the photo in her hands. "Quite good friends, actually, if my mind isn't deceiving me."

"Yes, we were. And then one day we were both naked, and you told me you were becoming my boss, and I didn't feel especially friendly toward you anymore."

"I know," he sighs, running one hand tiredly through his hair. "And, Regina, I'm so incredibly sorry about that, and if I had any way to make it up to you, I would go through hell to do so." God, he looks exhausted, Regina thinks. There are lines crisscrossing the skin beside his eyes that weren't there this morning, and whatever shaggy beard he's attempting to grow has developed some gray patches, practically overnight. He looks as old as she feels.

"Maybe...maybe I just need to get over it," she ventures carefully. Yes, he had hurt her. But he's also the only person still living who truly understands her, and whom she understands in return, and right now, when the world seems at its most incomprehensible, maybe that matters more.

"You don't have to. You trusted me with your friendship and I betrayed that trust.

"No more than I betrayed myself."

She stares at the picture again, at the glowing young woman in the arms of her beloved, wearing a brilliant smile of joy for her best friends' happiness and excitement for her future. It's a blissful smile, a hopeful smile. The smile of someone who is living rather than waiting to die.

The smile of someone she no longer remembers how to be.

She feels Robin's hand rest gently on her shoulder, and she lets it stay there.

"Do you think those crazy kids ever had any idea they'd be us in ten years?"

She tries to laugh, but it won't come out. "I think...I think Marian might have. She was always a little wiser than the rest of us."

"Yeah, she was," Robin agrees. Losing half of your family to gang-violence before the age of eighteen will do that to you, Regina thinks, remembering with a sickening pang of guilt why she was the sole bridesmaid at that wedding.

"Daniel..." she continues, voice cracking and then trailing off. There's not a chance that Daniel, grinning from ear to ear with his cheek pressed against the top of Regina's head and his hands resting on her belly where the baby, she recalls, had been kicking up a storm that day, knew he'd be dead less than a week later. She wonders, if they had known, what would they have done differently?

She wouldn't have said no to that last dance, she thinks, a sob rising painfully in her chest. She would have held him close as they swayed under the light of the stars until the sun came up, ignoring the soreness in

her feet that was absolutely nothing in comparison to the sheer agony she's been carrying in her heart ever since she lost him.

She would have set a damned date for the wedding.

She feels the tears begin streaming down her cheeks before she can stop them, and then Robin's arms are around her, small droplets – *his* tears, she realizes – landing on the top of her head, and she presses her face into his shoulder and pulls him closer, praying that somehow, in spite of everything that's happened to and between them, they can perhaps still manage to ground each other even as the ground feels like it's caving in.

"You were right, you know," he sniffs. "What you told me that night – I still remember. The pain fades, but the loneliness..."

"The loneliness gets worse," she recalls. Fighting back her remaining tears, she dries her eyes by rubbing them against Robin's sleeve.

"I need a drink," Robin says abruptly. "Would you care to join me?"

Without waiting for a reply, he extracts himself from the embrace and strides out toward the kitchen, one hand swiping furiously at his cheeks. Regina slowly exhales and gently restores the photo to its place, turning her head to check on the little boy who is still sleeping peacefully in his bed, unaware of the incredible sadness weighting the air around him. She presses a gentle kiss on his forehead, watching as he smiles in his sleep without so much as a stir, and makes her way to the window.

Slowly, she pushes it open and leans outward, inhaling the cool night air and gazing up at the stars, so brilliant tonight even with all the lights of the city below them. She remembers looking up at the stars as a child, filled with wonderment at the unfathomable infinity of the universe. Tonight, millions, maybe billions of other children will be doing the same, staring at the night sky and thinking of their dreams, perhaps making a wish for their future, blissfully unaware that the future may never come for them.

And for five of them, it won't. Five children will never wish upon a star again.

Robin reappears by her side with two tumblers of whiskey, one full and one half-empty like he's been drinking on the way over. He hands her the full one and looks up. "Clear night tonight," he remarks. Regina nods. "When I was a kid, my parents used to take us for vacation in Western Mass. We had this cabin on top of a mountain, and it was so dark up there at night, with no one else around, and you could see so many stars. I used to just lie out on the grass and stare at them, and think about how small and insignificant we all are in the grand scheme of things. And yet, everything that happens in our lives feels so monumental."

"I used to do something similar."

"And then days like today happen, and I get that feeling again," he says sadly, shaking his head. "Like nothing I do even matters."

"It matters to him," Regina points out, jerking her head toward Roland.

"It matters to him," Robin agrees, raising his glass as if in toast. "To Roland."

Regina clinks their glasses together and adds, "And Marian."

"And Daniel...and Henry."

"And Ayana, Jerome, Oscar, Michael, and Bria," Regina finishes. They both take a long swig of whiskey, grimacing at the burning sensation as it slides down their throats. The stars seems to twinkle brighter for just an instant, and Regina thinks she might even see one shooting across the sky, though perhaps that's just exhaustion causing her vision to blur. Anyway, she doesn't try to make a wish. It's not like they ever come true.

"I...um...I think I'm going to sleep in here tonight," Robin mumbles after a few minutes. "Just...well, you know, I want to..."

"I'll stay and help you protect him," Regina offers. "That is, if you don't mind."

"No, not at all. It's just...are you sure?"

"I'll stay with you," Regina says with an air of finality, "because that's what friends do."

"Friends? Are we friends again?"

"Tonight we are; we can reevaluate tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good," Robin says with a small smile. "Friends don't let friends get drunk and depressed alone?"

"Something like that."

They turn back to the little boy curled on his bed, one arm wrapped around a stuffed monkey while the other holds his thumb in his mouth, and Robin takes another sip while lifting his other arm around Regina's shoulders. She leans into him, eyes never leaving Roland. Although she feels full of warmth from the alcohol in her stomach and the body pressed against her, it never quite reaches her heart.

The pain fades, but the loneliness only gets worse.

"That first mother," Emma tells Mary Margaret, words slurring slightly as all the alcohol she's consumed gradually makes its way through her bloodstream up to her brain, "it was like the second she opened the door and saw it was cops, she knew."

"You've said that. Several times now," the ADA informs her, awkwardly patting the drunk and morose detective on the back.

"Sorry," Emma mumbles.

"It's okay, it's just-"

"She knew her kid was dead. And I just...I'm just going over and over it in my head. The look on her face – what it must feel like in that moment. The moment you realize you're entire world's been ripped apart, just like that." She shakes her head and shudders, finding it all too easy to put herself in the other woman's shoes. The alcohol was supposed to numb her emotions, not unlock even more of them.

"I can't imagine," Mary Margaret says sadly, "but I don't think dwelling on it is particularly healthy."

Emma isn't listening. "I should call my son again," she says abruptly. She needs Henry. She needs him like she needs oxygen, even though she's supposed to be the mother and he's the child, and he's the one who's supposed to need her. "This time I'll *make* Neal let me talk to him."

Not that she had even asked the first time, the still-reasonable part of her brain points out. Because she knew he'd be asleep. She was being a responsible parent.

Blanchard checks her watch. "It's one in the morning. And you probably don't want him to talk to you like this."

"Like what?"

"Well, you're drunk."

Emma stops and puts down the phone she was about to unlock as a sinking realization washes over her. "Am I a horrible parent?" she asks.

"What? No, not at all. I mean...I don't think so. I've never actually seen-"

"What kind of woman picks her job over her child?" Emma asks, feeling a sob rise up in her chest. She fights to keep it down. "Like, seriously, I just let his dad take him to New York without me. Who does that?" She

starts to consider all the ways she could right this situation. She could go to South Station right now, take the first bus down to New York and bring Henry back with her by tomorrow night.

When she starts to voice these ideas, though, Mary Margaret looks alarmed. They barely know each other, after all, and yet she's somehow the one stuck in this position. "I'm sure you were trying to do what was best for him, and when you wake up tomorrow, you'll realize that you did. I'm sure Henry knows that you love him," the ADA says slowly. "But, for now, I think we need to start getting everybody home. We do have to work in the morning."

Emma blinks and tries to refocus, but it's hard to keep one thought in her head for more than a couple of seconds – except, naturally, for the unwelcome ones. Obviously, she can't go kidnap Henry. He's happy in New York, she reminds herself. She tried to give him his best chance, and she succeeded. He knows she loves him. He does. And she needs to get some fucking sleep. "Yeah," she croaks. "Where are the guys?"

They find Jones standing in the doorway of the men's room watching over Nolan, who is vomiting repeatedly into the toilet.

"I guess he had a bit more than usual," he mutters.

"It's been a long night," Emma agrees. Her head is starting to feel like a freight train is running right through it.

Mary Margaret sighs and runs a hand through her short hair. "Okay," she says decisively after a moment of consideration. "I'm going to take him home and make sure he's okay for the night. You two-" she reaches into her purse and pulls out the cash Locksley had slipped her before "-are going to take a cab home. Together, alone, I don't care. But you will *not* be driving. Understand?"

"Yes, mother," Jones mutters. Emma flashes the ADA a small but genuine smile and nods, grabbing Jones's arm and pulling him toward the door. At least one of them is keeping her shit together.

"Where do you live?" she asks tiredly.

"I'm all the way out in Cambridge, by Kendall Square."

"I'm in that same direction. Want to split a cab to the station and go our separate ways from there? Save money?"

He agrees, and as they get in the cab, he chuckles humorlessly and says, "What do you think Dave and the ADA are going to get up to tonight?"

Emma rolls her eyes. "My guess is nothing. He's probably going to pass out and she's going to make sure he doesn't choke on his own vomit. A real romantic evening."

"You never know," Jones says with a shrug. "Comfort sex is a real thing. People lose their inhibitions when a tragic event happens."

"Yeah," Emma argues, "but Mary Margaret is not going to take advantage of David when he's drunk off his ass, and he's probably not up for it, anyway."

"What about you?" he asks.

"I – what?" He's leaning in close to her, too close, and he smells like rum and sweat, and he will probably regret this tomorrow morning when he's sober.

"You. Are you up for it?"

"Dude," she says, leaning away and wrinkling her nose, "no. I – I'm gay."

This could go one of several ways, she thinks apprehensively, wondering how in the hell this day ended with her fending off the advances of her drunken coworker and coming out to him. She braces herself for the worst.

It doesn't happen. "Oh," he says slowly, blinking in confusion and backing up like he suddenly realized just how uncomfortably close they

were. "I didn't – I had no idea. I – I'm really sorry."

She shrugs. As he said, people lose their inhibitions when something tragic happens. "Don't be. I mean, of all the horrible things that happened today, that doesn't even rank in the top ten." She'd thought, at seven in the morning, that putting Henry on the train back to New York was the worst thing that would happen. How horribly wrong she had been.

Jones settles back into his seat and shakes his head vigorously like he's trying to clear it. "You really miss your son, don't you?"

Emma nods her head and squeezes her eyelids shut. She won't cry in a cab. She won't. "Every day. But...at least he's still alive, you know? Like, I could do something about it, if I wanted to."

"So why don't you?"

Emma exhales heavily and buries her face in her hands. "I don't know," she mumbles. "I just don't know."

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: mention of sex with slightly dubious consent (due to alcohol)

Emma wakes to the sound of birds loudly chirping from her phone and curses her son for changing her alarm to something so irritating and then herself for setting it to so absurdly early an hour. She's pretty sure the high-pitched squeaking is going to make her head split in two.

With a loud grunt, she rolls over to turn it off and instantly freezes when she feels something underneath her.

It's another body.

Emma tries to stop herself from gasping as she takes in her surroundings. This is not her bed. The sheets and blankets are a different material. This is also definitely not her bedroom, she realizes as her eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. And the person in bed with her...oh, good lord. She hadn't slept with Jones, had she? He's the last person she remembers. She feels bile rise in her throat at the thought – he's her *coworker* and friend and a man and...it's just not possible. No matter how drunk she was, she wouldn't have done *that*.

No, it's a woman. She's lying on her side, so only half of her face is visible, but Emma is virtually certain she's never seen this woman before. That's good, she supposes. Not great, obviously, but at least it's a little bit less embarrassing. She has dark hair, long and curly; she's pretty in kind of a harsh way. *Who the hell is she?*

Well, the first order of business is to make sure her unexpected bedfellow doesn't wake up before she figures it out, Emma concludes, fumbling for her phone to turn off the impossibly loud alarm. She breathes a sigh of relief when it's finally silenced and the other woman hasn't so much as stirred. She's a heavy sleeper, thankfully. She probably won't notice anyone escaping through the window, then. But first, she has to find her clothes, because the first thing she notices when she lifts the comforter is that she's completely naked. Not that she's particularly surprised, given the circumstances, but it's still not a terribly heartening realization.

She locates yesterday's suit on the floor at the foot of the bed. It reeks of booze – she should probably drop it off at the cleaners' on the way to work today. Work. She needs to get some hardcore caffeine in her system before she even thinks about that. Slipping into her clothes as quickly and gracefully as she possibly can with the dim light and a head that feels full of bricks and cotton, she takes one last look at the woman she'd apparently slept with before opening the window to climb down the fire escape.

The blanket slips off her bare shoulder, and Emma notices a tattoo in the shape of an anchor on it. *An anchor?* she muses. *Why...*and then the night comes back to her with a sickening clarity.

"You know," Jones mentions as the taxi pulls into a residential neighborhood and starts to slow down, "I've got a lesbian sister."

Emma shrugs. "Good for you?"

"Her name is Milah," he continues, "and she's single. We live together."

"That's nice. Why are – wait, you're not trying to set me up, are you?"

"Possibly. I was just thinking, you know, she and I tend to be into the same type of woman, and-"

"I'm not...I'm not looking for a relationship," Emma stammers, "especially not tonight."

"I'm not suggesting a relationship, love. Just a momentary distraction - something to get your mind off today."

"I thought that was what the rum was for," Emma groans, wondering at the mess her emotions have already managed to get her into.

"Sometimes rum isn't enough; you've got to do something else to blow off steam."

Blow off steam? Where had she heard that expression before?

"And you think I should blow off some steam with your sister? That has to be the weirdest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Jones looks confused. "Why? Because I was just hitting on you?"

"Among other things."

"That was before I knew you batted for the other team. Now, I realize I can't give you the experience you desire, but I do know someone who can."

"Aren't brothers supposed to be...oh, I don't know...protective? Aren't you supposed to think no one's good enough for your sister and, like, defend her with a pistol in hand, or something?"

"You've never met my sister," Jones says with a loud snort. "She'd never stand for that."

Emma sighs and looks longingly at the open window. She can't believe she had allowed herself to be convinced that this was a good idea. Her coworker's sister? What the hell? She can't just climb out the window now – Milah herself would probably be fine with it (she had seemed very well-versed in the art of one night stands), but Killian would likely not take kindly to her sneaking out on his sister, and he's the one she has to work with.

Her electronic bluebirds start their infernal chirping again, and a message pops up on her screen reminding her that she's supposed to meet Regina at the river in five minutes.

Groaning and rubbing her aching head, Emma wonders whose wrath she can better afford: Killian's for ditching his sister, or Regina's for ditching their run. She's supposed to be an adult – a homicide detective and a mother. How is she still getting herself into these ridiculous situations? This is why she only sees her son once a month.

She spies a pen on the bedside table and makes her decision. She grabs a receipt from her wallet and scrawls a note on the back:

Dear Milah,

No, she can't write "dear." This isn't a pen-pal letter and she's not in the seventh grade.

Milah – Thanks for a great

A great night? A fun night? It was neither of those things, although that was hardly Milah's fault. If anything, she had made it marginally better by providing a couple hours of entertainment and an emotionally neutral place to sleep, though Emma is now regretting taking her up on either of those things.

Milah will totally understand if she sneaks out without leaving a note. Right? And Killian...he was so drunk last night that maybe he won't remember that he brought her home in the first place. Well, she can hope, anyway.

"Milah, meet Emma Swan," Killian announces, opening his apartment door with a flourish. The woman sitting in front of the TV promptly stands up and makes her way over the Emma with one hand outstretched and the other holding a beer.

Looking the blonde up and down, she wolf-whistles and says appreciatively, "My brother didn't exaggerate. You are gorgeous."

Emma shoots Killian a slightly confused and irritated look – why the hell has he been talking about her with his sister? – and gives Milah a once-over of her own. She's tall, with long brown hair, attractive in a way that screams sexy rather than classically beautiful, and her shorts and tank-top leave little to the imagination.

She looks...well, if Emma had known that Detective Jones had a sister, this is just about how she would have expected her to look.

"We had a tough case today," he's informing her now. "And Emma was thinking she'd like to...let out her frustrations...with a lovely lady."

Milah raises her eyebrows. "What are you, my pimp?" she asks her brother. Turning quickly to Emma, she adds, "By the way, in case you have any friends in Vice, I'm not a prostitute, though I have nothing but respect for adult sex-workers who are in the profession by choice."

"Um..." Emma looks around and wonders if she's even been in such an odd situation. "Yeah, sure. Power to them," she mutters.

"Well, I'm going downstairs to see if Tink's busy," Killian announces. "You two enjoy each other's company."

He stumbles slightly on his way out the door, and Milah smirks. "I'm sorry you have to work with my disaster of a brother," she says sympathetically. "He does have a good heart, though, under all the layers of idiocy."

"Yeah, I know," Emma says with a small smile. "I've seen it every now and again."

"Please tell me he didn't just abruptly invite you over to meet me after hitting on you and finding out you were a lesbian."

"I could tell you that, but it would be a lie, because that's pretty much exactly how it happened."

Milah sighs, though there's still a playful twinkle in her eyes that's a bit similar to her brother's. "I'm sorry, our parents really did teach us manners. But I guess the lessons didn't stick for certain people."

"It's alright," Emma quickly reassures the other woman. "He didn't...we're..."

"He's drunk off his ass; you're not doing so well yourself; it was a hard day. Yeah, I get it."

"Cool. Well, anyway, I-" Emma checks her watch and feels her eyebrows shoot to the top of her forehead. "I'll stop bothering you and head home."

"Thanks for putting up with my brother's matchmaking efforts," Milah says gratefully. "You should go home and get some sleep. Or, if home is far, you can always crash here."

"I don't really know how much sleep I'll be getting tonight," Emma mumbles.

"Your case bothering you?"

"Yeah."

"Stay, then," Milah orders. "I was about to find a movie to watch. You like beer?"

"Who doesn't like beer? But don't you *have to sleep?"*

"Jet lag," Milah says with a grimace, grabbing a beer from the fridge and quickly making her way back to the couch. She motions for her guest to sit down beside her and hands over a bottle of fancy European microbrew that Emma doesn't even recognize. "Just got back from a job in Germany – my whole body's out of whack."

"What do you do?" Emma asks curiously, taking a small sip of the beer. It's good. And strong.

"Photography, landscape and architecture stuff – mostly freelance, but I get pretty regular work with this one travel magazine, New Harbors."

"Nice. If you like to travel, I guess."

"I love to travel. I'd like to see the entire world, if I could."

"Then it seems like you're in the right field," Emma comments. "Is that what your tattoo is for? Like, sailing off to new harbors? Anchors aweigh?"

"Oh, this?" Milah points to the anchor on her shoulder and shakes her head. "It's more for 'Anchors Aweigh,' as in the Navy fight song. It's for my brother. Not Killian," she adds quickly. "Our older brother. He was in the Navy."

"Oh," Emma says softly, deducing that the oldest Jones must have passed on for his sister to be getting tattoos for him. "I'm...sorry."

Milah shrugs. "He died in the service of our country, which is what he always wanted. Strange thing to want, if you ask me, but I don't think he had any regrets when he went. Killian took it hard, though; they were really close."

"He's never spoken about it. I mean, not that he would necessarily have told me – we've only known each other for a little while."

"Yeah, he doesn't like to talk about it, but I've found it helps."

"Probably healthier than drinking," Emma says under her breath.

"Cheers to that," Milah sighs, clinking their beer bottles together. After a moment of drinking in silence, she turns back to Emma and asks, "How about you? Any siblings?"

"No. Well, none that I know of anyway." Seeing Milah's confused look, she explains, "I grew up in the foster system and never met my family, so anyone I meet could be my sibling, basically. I did have a couple dozen foster siblings over the course of my career, though."

"That's really fascinating." Milah's eyes are lit up with interest, and Emma wonders if all the alcohol in her system is confusing her, or if that comment really was as far out of left field as she had imagined it.

"What?"

"I mean, not that you grew up in foster care. That sounds shitty. I just mean the idea that anyone could be your sibling."

"It is, I guess. Or sort of awkward."

"At least as a cop, you have access to DNA testing equipment," Milah points out. "You should probably check every time you're about to pursue any kind of intimate relationship with someone."

"This is a really strange conversation to have when less than an hour ago, your brother was suggesting you and I have sex."

"True, and if we want to pursue that train of thought, we should probably stop talking about siblings in general."

"Do we?" Emma asks. "Want to pursue it?"

Milah leans her head to one side, considering, then places her beer bottle on the floor. She reaches up with both hands to cup Emma's cheeks and draws their faces closer together.

"I don't know. Do you?"

Emma's mouth is dry and part of her wants to run, but instead she leans in closer and lets Milah bring their lips together. Gently at first, but it's Emma who makes it more aggressive, her mouth desperate and hungry. She slips her tongue quickly in for a taste, and Milah sort of moans, and she tastes like beer – they both probably do – and she's not even particularly attracted to this woman, but there are hands touching her body and it feels good enough to flip the off switch on her common sense, and she finds herself tackling the brunette to the couch, hands reaching under the thin straps of her top to slip them off her shoulders.

"Bedroom," Milah grunts, pushing Emma up and leading her by the elbow through an open door. She's completely stripped down by the time they make it to the bed, and she eagerly helps Emma out of her work suit before pushing her onto the bed, her tongue exploring every inch of the blonde's mouth as her fingers creep slowly down her bare torso.

What follows is nothing either of them will want to write ballads about, but it helps Emma forget, and she thinks that perhaps that's all that matters.

And so, here we are, thinks Emma, looking down at her wrinkled suit in distaste and wishing she could take a shower sooner rather than later to rid herself of the pervading smell of sex and alcohol. What the hell was she thinking last night?

She notices that she has a missed call from Neal – why the hell is he up so early? – and remembers with horror that she had called him and said a lot of things that weren't particularly friendly or mature.

True, yesterday was shit, she wasn't in the best frame of mind, and all the drinking certainly didn't help. Still, she can't help but feel terribly ashamed that she allowed it to get this out of hand, that she had spent an entire night trying to forget the five children whose memories she should be trying to honor.

And Henry – what would Henry think of her right now?

She takes one disgusted look in the mirror over Milah's bureau and, without a backward glance at the woman herself, quickly climbs out the window and down the fire escape before vomiting in one of the curbside trashcans. Thankfully, she recognizes the neighborhood. It's about a ten minute walk from her house – maybe seven if she jogs it. She can rinse off and maybe even meet Regina for part of their morning run, if she feels any better after a cold shower and some Gatorade.

Pretend that it's an absolutely normal day and she didn't just potentially fuck up two or three of her very important relationships.

It's not until she's halfway home that she realizes she left the half-finished note on Milah's bedside table.

Regina checks her watch and purses her lips in annoyance. It's 5:05. Emma is late. Sighing, she replays their conversation from the night before over and over in her mind. The blonde had never *explicitly* said she was coming, Regina reminds herself. And Locksley had mentioned that the group at the bar wasn't doing well. Emma probably wouldn't turn up for a ten-mile run at five in the morning after a night of heavy drinking. Every ounce of reason says that she shouldn't be waiting. It's not as if she ever waits for anyone. She doesn't even enjoy running with a partner, anyway.

So, she takes off. She blames the heaviness in her heart on yesterday's shooting, and if she's running at a slower pace than usual, it must be due to lack of sleep. (Never mind that she'd slept better last night, on the floor beside Roland's bed, than she had in over a year, even if it was just four hours.) She's not worried about Emma.

Maybe she should call her.

No, that's a horrible idea. If the younger woman is sleeping – as Regina assumes she must be – such a call would be unwelcome and unappreciated. Besides, she's *not* worried.

Busy with her internal debate, she almost doesn't notice the figure who runs up alongside her. At least, not until that person says, "'Morning, partner," and almost gives her a heart attack.

"Detective Swan!" Regina gasps. "I mean, Emma. I...you...you're late," she stammers as she struggles to get her breathing back under control.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Emma mumbles, and Regina allows herself to break stride and look up at her partner for a moment. She looks terrible.

"Are you in any condition to be running?" Regina asks disbelievingly.

"I...I don't know. I'm hoping I can, like, sweat out the hangover."

Regina chuckles halfheartedly. "I'm not sure it works like that."

"Well, anyway, if I start to slow you down, you can just leave me behind. Usual deal."

"I'm feeling a little lethargic this morning, myself. We can run slowly."

Emma raises her eyebrows, and Regina wonders for a moment if the younger detective had caught her in a lie, but then she simply shrugs and continues jogging. "Rough night for you, too?"

"In a manner of speaking," Regina admits. "Probably not the same kind of rough night you had."

Emma blushes and looks down at her feet in shame. "I was just so upset," she mutters. "And then I drank too much and..."

"Happens to all of us, dear." The younger woman lets out a grunt of disbelief. "Really," Regina insists. "The key is to just keep moving forward."

The pair continue running in silence. They only make five slow, painful miles, but Emma comments at the end of it – clutching her aching head – that it feels like an accomplishment, and Regina allows herself to give her partner an awkward pat on the shoulder and tell her that it is. If she feels something vaguely like a jolt of electricity shooting up her arm and through her body at the contact, she tells herself it's because Emma doesn't know how to use dryer sheets.

Regina insists on taking Emma to the arraignment.

"I know we don't usually go, but I think you'll feel better seeing these two idiots start to face justice," the senior detective declares after verifying that everything is quiet at the station. "We don't have much else going on this morning."

Emma shrugs and nods her agreement, following her partner to the car. "Regina, thanks for being so understanding," she says quietly. "About this morning, and our run, and..."

"Don't mention it."

So she doesn't, but there's still a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach, something like guilt. Like she's done something she definitely shouldn't have. Which she has; it's just that Regina is, in fact, probably one of the last on the list of people to whom Emma Swan currently owes an apology.

What's alarming is the fact that there's a list.

She doesn't say anything for the remainder of the drive, and Regina doesn't try to make conversation either, seemingly unaware of her partner's continuing attempts to bob for air in a sea of her own regret. There's no noise from the inside of the car, not even music - Regina never plays any, and in the beginning, Emma was too afraid to ask; now it would just be awkward. Emma wonders, briefly, when the sound of an ambulance outside distracts her from the litany of all the people she's potentially hurt in the past twenty-four hours, what kinds of things Regina thinks about when she's silent like this. Actually, most of the time she's not sure what Regina is thinking about even when she's talking. *Probably a bunch of really smart things followed by bragging to herself about how much better she is than everyone else,* Emma thinks, feeling her lips curl upwards into a ghost of a smirk.

"We're here," Regina says suddenly, pulling into the courthouse parking lot. At only 8:30 in the morning, it's already packed with press vans, and people with microphones and cameras are swarming the front steps.

"Shit," mutters Emma.

Regina opens the door and straightens her shoulders like she's getting ready to march into battle. "Get ready to use your elbows," she advises.

Speechless, Emma nods vigorously and follows Regina up and into the building, head carefully lowered and elbows jutting outwards. In spite of her small stature, or maybe because of it, Detective Mills is an expert at clearing paths through large crowds of people, and it's all Emma can to do hurry behind her and try not to get lost in the shuffle.

"Detective Mills, do you have a comment about the Mildred Ave shooting?" someone cries out, thrusting a microphone into her face, but it's shoved aside before the question is even complete.

"Wow, you're...well, you never cease to amaze me. Let's just leave it at that," Emma says appreciatively once they're safely inside the courtroom, where press and cameras are thankfully prohibited.

Regina smiles and uncharacteristically ducks her head. "Thank you, dear, that's quite the compliment," she murmurs.

"Good morning," says Mary Margaret. She seems much more subdued than usual, and her eyes lack their usual sparkle - probably a combination of sadness and exhaustion, like the rest of them - but there's a determined set in her jaw that gives Emma a surge of confidence. The ADA means business.

Emma manages to flash her a small smile, but Regina keeps it to a short grunt of acknowledgement and a stiff "Hello, Miss Blanchard."

The growing crowd of lawyers and spectators all rise to their feet as Judge Gold enters the court, and Emma looks on eagerly to catch a glimpse of the enigmatic judge the entire Boston Police Department seems to think is the most intimidating man in the city. Emma's had to testify in a few cases throughout her career, but nothing big enough to warrant entering *his* courtroom.

"Toto, we're not in Computer Crimes anymore," Emma mumbles, narrowing her eyes as the two shooting suspects are led into the courtroom. Neither one looks the slightest bit remorseful, and she thinks it might be nice to punch those blasé expressions right off their faces. Or perhaps to take her own gun and-

"Emma, sit down," Regina hisses. Judge Gold is banging his gavel and calling for order. Mary Margaret gives the two detectives a grim nod and approaches the bench.

"Half a million dollars," Emma whistles as they reenter the squad room. "That's pretty high, isn't it?"

Regina grimaces. "It is, but it's nothing the Browns can't handle. Vince won't spend another night in jail; I can almost guarantee it. They've probably got enough in the bank to bail Tony out, too, but they won't."

"That's absurd."

"What, that they won't pay Tony's bail? Why would they?"

"Not that," Emma snaps. Regina raises one eyebrow at her tone – probably the angriest she's ever heard her partner. "Why would they bail out their dumb kid who's responsible for five deaths?"

"Well, they're not going to let their son sit in jail," she says in surprise. "Even if they didn't love him, it's all about status. They'll probably make a big show of having him do community service, show he's an upstanding citizen who's trying to do better."

Emma scowls and presses her fists against the top of her desk. "He deserves to sit in jail," she mutters. "He deserves every single terrible thing they could do to him in there. Both of them do."

"Maybe," Regina agrees quietly. "But you might not feel the same way if it was your son."

"If he was guilty? Yeah, you better believe I would!" Emma exclaims. "Loving someone doesn't mean you forgive everything horrible they do. He has to pay for his crimes."

"And he will," Regina says reassuringly. "He'll go to trial – there's no way he's getting off."

"He could," Emma argues. "You said it yourself – he has a super rich family, high status, whatever. Maybe Judge Gold owes them a favor,

too. People like that get away with shit all the time. No offense," she adds quickly.

Regina sighs and runs a hand through her hair. "None taken," she mumbles, because she hasn't counted herself among "people like that" for a very long time, although Emma clearly does. She won't deny that it hurts, that she doesn't want her partner to lump her together with their reprehensible murder suspect just because of her family's income level, but it's far from the greatest source of pain in her life and it's not important right now.

"Anyway," she says in as calm a voice as she can muster, "I imagine that the type of parents who would bail their son out of jail for being an accessory to murder are the same type who would raise a son capable of such a thing in the first place. I don't – I don't know...Henry." She hopes and prays that Emma doesn't notice the way her voice cracks when she says the boy's name. "But I have to assume that you and...you and his father have been teaching him actual values."

Emma nods. "That's the goal, anyway."

Both woman exhale and stand together in silence, and Regina finds herself reaching tentatively across the space between them to grasp her partner's hand. There's that jolt again – someone really needs to educate Emma on the proper way to do laundry – and Regina feels a tiny shiver travel up her arm and down her spine as she suddenly becomes aware of the close proximity of her shoulder to Emma's and the heat radiating from the younger woman's body. This is not at all how she intended the gesture to turn out. She quickly loosens her hand to release them from this terribly awkward contact, but Emma holds on tighter.

Regina looks up to meet Emma's eyes, glassy and shining with unshed tears, and she feels her heart tugging in her chest, drawing her closer. She thinks that perhaps whatever strangeness she's feeling now is worth it if Emma is somehow finding comfort and solace from this. From her. She wants this, she realizes. She wants to be the one Emma turns to for support, the one who keeps her afloat when the waters get too high.

She offers the blonde a tiny smile and lets herself absorb the warmth that enters her chest when it's returned.

And then, at the sound of approaching footsteps, she reluctantly drops Emma's hand and shakes herself out of her lovely trance. It must be the exhaustion addling her brain - maybe she can get Dr. Hopper to prescribe those sleeping pills again.

"They're about to show something about the shooting on Channel 11," Nolan mumbles. He has an extra large coffee in his hand and he's squinting against the glare of the fluorescent lights on the white walls and floor. Jones follows, looking slightly better off than his partner but not much.

Regina reaches for the remote and flips on the ancient TV in the corner of the room. "How uplifting," she comments.

The segment is short, a clip of Locksley's interview from the previous night, some footage from the courtroom of the two defendants being escorted away in handcuffs, then a newscaster saying something about a

memorial service for the victims being held near the community center that night.

"We should go, pay our respects," Nolan comments, and the other detectives nod their agreement.

"Honor their memories in a productive way, for a change," Emma says under her breath before meeting Jones's eyes across the room. There's something in the glance they exchange – a change in atmosphere. Regina feels it, and she's sure Nolan would, too, if he weren't quite so out of it.

"We should-"

"Yeah," Jones says quickly. "Not here." He motions for Emma to follow him into the hall where they commence a whispered discussion that's perhaps not as quiet as they might have intended. Regina's not eavesdropping – she swears she's not.

And once she's heard it, she really wishes she hadn't.

"About last night," Emma begins guiltily.

"Never happened. I've erased it from my memory, as should you."

"Good. And it will never happen again."

Jones shrugs, stepping back into the doorway. "If that's what you want. It's probably a good idea."

"It can't. It's...I'm really sorry-"

"Don't mention it. No harm done. It was a bad night for everyone and, well...ill-thought-out one night stands happen. No offense was taken, I assure you."

"That's good," Emma says, breathing a sigh of relief and staring down at her feet. "I just...I feel so stupid," she mumbles. Suddenly, her shoots drift upward to meet Regina's, and her lips part in horror as she notices that both her partner and Jones's – Nolan has somehow drifted out of his fog and is staring at the pair with a mixture of shock and disgust – have heard every word, or at least enough to draw their own conclusions.

Emma turns away and flees the room, and Nolan stares helplessly at her retreating form before turning to his partner and demanding, "What the hell happened last night?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened."

"That's not what it sounded like. *Something* happened between you and Swan last night."

"Absolutely nothing happened between me and Swan," Jones reiterates angrily, "which you would have known if you hadn't spent the night puking on Mary Margaret."

"And *you* spent the night with our ADA? How unprofessional can the two of you get?" Regina sneers. Not that she's really in any place to criticize. But they don't have to know that, and she's too blinded by rage to acknowledge it. "The four of you, really."

"Mary Margaret and – you know what, it's not important," Nolan says tiredly. "Last night was...maybe we should all just collectively erase last night from our memories."

"I'm surprised you have any memories of it to begin with," Jones mutters, which causes Nolan to turn around and clock him clumsily in the face.

"Gentlemen!" Regina hollers, the volume of her voice causing both men to clutch their aching heads. "Stop it! Get out of here – take a walk or something."

"You can't give us orders," Nolan argues. "You're not our C.O. no matter how much you'd like to be."

"No, but I am, and I'm telling you to do exactly as Detective Mills suggested," Locksley says calmly from his office door. "Go! Talk it out; come back when you can behave like adults."

Nolan and Jones, still glaring daggers at each other, walk out the door, and Regina leans against her desk, inhaling sharply. She's struggling to review the thoughts racing through her head. Yes, if that conversation was what it sounded like, then Emma and Detective Jones had...why does she even care?

Yes, her partner had ignored her (very important) advice, not to mention violating her own stated principle of never getting involved with coworkers. And yes, she had violated it with the last person Regina probably would have chosen. It should be enough to make her feel mildly annoyed, not like someone has just punched her in the gut, tripped her, and spit on her face.

And yet, here she is.

"Mills, my office!" Locksley calls.

Regina rolls her eyes. Just when she thought this morning couldn’t get any worse, she's now probably going to have to sit through some kind of lecture on how to properly speak to her coworkers. Wonderful. Stalking into the office, she slams the door shut behind her and glares expectantly at him.

"It's about your partner," he begins, and Regina immediately holds up her hand.

"Robin, with all due respect, I don't feel like talking about Detective Swan right now, so unless there's an emergency-"

"I happened to overhear the conversation between her and Jones in the squad room, and I thought-"

"That's not an emergency; nor is it a topic of conversation I wish to pursue at the present time," Regina spits out, her back ramrod straight and hands clenched at her sides to prevent them from shaking. "So, if that's all, then I have work to do. Good day, Lieutenant."

She turns to leave, but of course, the imbecile is still talking. "You know, when I saw them last night, I had the suspicion that something might-"

That causes Regina's head to whip around so fast that she feels a sharp pain in her neck, which is still a bit stiff from the night before. It takes all her self-control not to wince and reach up to rub the sore spot – she *won't* show any more weakness in front of him. They may be friends again, but he's still her boss and there are boundaries. Breaking them last night was a one-time mistake.

"And you didn't do anything to stop it?" she demands. "You just let it happen?"

"Well, yes." He looks confused. "It's a bit unprofessional, but as we established last night, they're both grown adults. They can make their own decisions – their own mistakes. You're the one who said that."

Regina scowls. He's not wrong, but that doesn't change the fact that this entire situation makes her want to punch someone in the face, and he's the closest target.

"If they're grown adults, then why are we gossiping about them like a bunch of teenagers?" she hisses, trying to do some of the breathing exercises the department shrink taught her back when she was still having flashbacks in a futile attempt to control her anger. "I hope you didn't interrupt me just for this!"

He stares at her funny for a minute until something seems to dawn on him. "Mills, are you jealous?" he asks, eyes widening. She can almost detect a sparkle, some strange kind of mirth, behind his gaze, but she doesn't spare it much thought.

"Jealous? What the hell, Locksley? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't," he says with an exaggerated eye roll. "And I'm glad we're back to being friends, because now I can lovingly tell you that you're one of the least self-aware people I've ever met."

"You think I want to have meaningless sex with a man who's only capable of having feelings for rum?" Regina asks in shock. "I'd like to think someone who claims to be my friend would know me a little better than that.

"I think – you know what? No. Forget I said anything. You're probably right; it was meaningless sex after the shittiest of shitty days, that everyone involved will forget about within a couple of weeks."

"Good," Regina snaps, before she even realizes the words that are coming out of her mouth. Robin raises his eyebrows. "I mean, it's not great, but it's better than...well, if they decided to pursue a relationship, it could completely ruin the team dynamic," she fumbles, meeting his smirk with a menacing glare. "Anyway, their feelings toward each other are hardly our business."

"Of course, as long as they keep it off the clock, which...I was just thinking, maybe you could have a chat with Swan about it? I think she's probably going to be confused, and it's not as if you haven't-"

He abruptly stops, as though realizing that finishing his sentence could have disastrous results. "She looks up to you. She sees you as a mentor. You could help her get through it."

She sees you as a mentor.

She's not sure why those words, which she's certain were meant as a compliment, hurt her so badly.

"I am not the department shrink," she says coolly. "Perhaps you could recommend that she set up an appointment with Dr. Hopper."

Robin sighs. "Think about it, Regina."

Regina thinks about it.

If Emma sees her as a mentor, why did she so blatantly ignore her advice?

Then again, doing something idiotic and self-destructive while intoxicated after a hard case is practically a rite of passage in this job, she thinks. And Emma's actions, while certainly humiliating, are hardly the worst she's seen.

Anyway, the harsh reality is that no matter how Regina feels, she needs her partner to be functional, so she buries the churning emotions inside of her that she can't even begin to process – not that she wants to – and goes in search of the younger detective to help her pick up the pieces.

She finds Emma in the bathroom, attempting to wipe the tears off her face in front of the mirror.

"I'm fine," she snaps, splashing water on the angry pink blotches staining her pale cheeks. She's obviously been crying for quite some time.

"No, you're not," Regina replies. Pissed as she is, she can't help but feel her heart go out to the woman. She knows all too well what it's like. "Nobody's fine."

"Yeah, well, everyone else is doing a much better job of hiding it," Emma sniffs.

"Years of experience. Also, that's just...not true."

"If you're here to tell me to get my shit together, don't worry. I'm working on it."

"I'm not judging you," Regina says quickly. "Truly, I'm not."

"I'm an idiot," Emma mumbles.

"Perhaps, if you think you're the first person to ever get drunk after a difficult day and have meaningless sex with a coworker."

"No, I meant – wait, what?" Emma abruptly turns from the mirror and regards Regina with wide, horrified eyes. "You think I had sex with *Jones*?"

"I...we assumed..." Regina's voice trails off, and she scratches her head in confusion. "You didn't?"

"No, I..." Emma looks down now, wringing her hands. "I had sex with his sister." When a minute goes by with no response, she slowly turns her head to stare at her partner with a gaze full of apprehension. "I told you, I don't get involved with coworkers. And, also, I...I don't get involved with *men*."

"Oh" is the only word that manages to make its way out of Regina's mouth. Her mind is in turmoil and she has no idea why. It's not as though Emma's preference for women comes as a huge shock. In fact, besides herself, the only female cop she knows well who hadn't eventually come out of the closet was...well, Marian. And even then – no, she can't think about that. It was a long time ago and they'd sworn to forget it ever happened. It's just that...

A nagging thought comes, unbidden and unwelcome, to the forefront of her consciousness: *if she's attracted to women, why isn't she attracted to me?* She beats it back down, mentally berating her own folly in the process. Regina presses a hand against the doorframe to brace herself against the onslaught of self-loathing firing from all directions in her own voice, her mother's, even Daniel's. *Weak. Stupid.* She doesn't even want Emma Swan to be attracted to her. That would be – just...no. Besides, her partner is right. Any sort of involvement with coworkers is a mistake. Unequivocally, *always*, a mistake.

Emma is still watching her, waiting for a reaction. "If...if that's a problem for you," the blonde begins tentatively, "then, I'm sure Locksley can reassign-"

"No!" Regina exclaims. "I don't...I don't have a problem with your sexual preferences. And I certainly don't want a new partner."

"Okay, good." Emma smiles – it's small, but genuine. "And you don't have a problem with my idiotic mistakes from last night?"

Regina cocks her head ambivalently. "Everyone makes idiotic mistakes now and then."

"You don't. Locksley doesn't. Nolan and Jones do, but they somehow manage to put it behind them when they walk into work each morning. I just...I've never felt like more of a rookie. You guys have it all figured out, and I feel like I'm drowning or something."

It takes all of Regina's self-control not to laugh at the notion that she somehow has things all figured out when she still can't even sleep in her own bed at night, but she imagines Emma might find that disrespectful. Instead, she says cryptically, "Things aren't always as they seem."

"I saw Locksley in front of the news cameras," Emma says quietly. "Perfectly calm and composed. Like, obviously he was sad about what happened, but-"

"And why do you think he's the commanding officer of this unit?" Regina demands.

Emma gives the senior detective a blank, uncomprehending stare. "You mean besides the fact that BPD is sexist as hell?"

"That's part of it," Regina agrees. Three years later, it still hurts, and she's not going to pretend that she's over it. "But it's also because of

what you saw. He has the ability to do that – to tell the people what they want to hear. What they *need* to hear, so they can sleep at night."

"Yeah, but I bet you could, too."

She can't quite stop the smile that quirks the edges of her lips, but she quickly wipes it away to get back to business. "Thank you, but that's not the point. Do you think Locksley sleeps at night? Do you think any of us do? He goes home and hugs his son and then watches over him like a guard dog all night with his gun on the bedside table. Why do you think I run ten miles every day, or Jones drinks half his weight in rum, or Nolan spends ninety percent of the time acting like a self-righteous grandfather and the other ten percent behaving like a child with no understanding of human social behavior?"

"Because the job can make you crazy?" Emma guesses.

"Because there is no foolproof way to stay emotionally stable when every day of our lives, we see the absolute worst humanity has to offer. Brutal, senseless crimes that tear apart families and destroy people's hopes and dreams. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do about it. Sure, we can put the offenders behind bars, but it doesn't matter. We can't bring back the dead. We can't restore happy endings to any of those children's families. And even if we take one murderer off the streets, another one will come along tomorrow. We like to pretend that we're the heroes and good can triumph over evil, but we all know that we're not. And it doesn't."

Emma bites back a sob and glares at Regina with watery eyes laced with betrayal. "This is the worst pep talk I've ever had," she mutters. "I hope you didn't actually say all of that to make me feel better."

"No, I said it because I want you to realize that having a one-night stand with a coworker's sister and crying in the ladies' room at the station are both perfectly understandable reactions to an event that is heartbreakingly impossible to understand."

"So, if this is all senseless and nothing we do makes a difference," Emma says with a weary sigh, "then what exactly are we supposed to do?"

"What we always do – what we swore to do. Protect and serve the people of Boston to the best of our ability, and keep hoping that one day we'll live in a world where that will be enough."

"That doesn't really seem like a solution."

"It's not, but it's all we have. So, dry your face, then we'll tackle yesterday's mountain of paperwork and order some artery-clogging takeout and pretend we've got everything under control."

Emma responds by throwing her arms around Regina and burying her face her hair. Regina stiffens, waiting for the shiver to pass through her body again, but this time it doesn't. This time there's just warmth and

comfort, and Regina exhales before pulling Emma against her, hands running repeatedly up and down the younger woman's back.

"Regina, if I haven't said it before, I'm really glad you're my partner," Emma says softly.

Chapter 9

To say that the memorial service for the shooting victims is sad seems like a drastic understatement, but it's the only word Emma think of to describe it in her head.

She tries devastating on for size, along with traumatic, heart-breaking, and gut-wrenching, but in the end, the word she keeps coming back to is 'sad.'

It's really, terribly, horribly sad.

The detectives stand together near the back of the crowd assembled in an empty lot just a block away from the crime scene. ADA Blanchard openly weeps. Emma sheds a few tears, as do Nolan and Locksley. Mills and Jones remain stone-faced, but the former's hands are shaking and the latter's eyes are rimmed with red.

Emma thinks she sees Officer Fa up near the front, with the community center director, and all the kids' families. There are five black balloons with the kids' names on them tied to empty chairs. Ayana, Jerome, Oscar, Michael, and Bria. It's eerily morbid but somehow strangely fitting.

The service is simple and reasonably brief. There are prayers and songs in various languages, chosen by the children's families. Then Ms. James gives a speech about the five kids who died and how wonderful they were and how they were taken too soon that has everyone bawling. A trembling Officer Fa steps up to give a speech about prevention of gun violence in the community which strikes Emma as slightly inappropriate because one of the people involved wasn't even from this neighborhood; he was a rich white boy who doesn't even have the excuse of being pressured into a gang. But hey, it's not her community and she's certain that Officer Fa, who's there every day, is a much better judge of what's needed.

It's cathartic in some ways and unsettlingly *not* in others.

"I need a drink," Nolan mutters when it's all over. "But I also need to not drink again for the rest of my life."

"You should probably go home," Mary Margaret advises, "and think about more productive ways to deal with your feelings. I'm going back to the office to work on pre-trial stuff."

"I will replace your carpet," he promises.

"You ruined her carpet, mate?" Jones demands. "Idiot."

Locksley glares at both of them. "I'm off to put my son to bed. I sincerely hope that all of my detectives can stay out of trouble for one night."

"Shooting range?" Jones suggests after the lieutenant leaves.

Nolan shrugs. "Sure. Emma, you in?"

Emma considers for a moment and then shakes her head. "Strangely enough, I don't feel much like shooting a gun right now."

The two male detectives take off together, leaving only Emma and Regina behind. "So..." Emma mumbles. "Do you feel like getting dinner?"

"I can eat," Regina says with a slight shrug.

Emma pulls a face at her partner and admits, "I don't really feel like being alone right now."

How the hell they end up at the Lion Flower – *not* drinking, because Emma never wants to see rum or possibly even beer again for the rest of their life – is unclear. She's fairly certain that she used to know more places to eat cheap, greasy burgers, places that don't bring back recollections of nights she'd rather forget. But here they are.

"Anyway, Regina, I just wanted to say thank you," Emma mumbles, in between French fries.

Regina narrows her eyes, confused. "I don't recall doing anything worth being thanked, but I suppose you're welcome." She bites into an onion ring and practically moans in bliss. She hates the Lion Flower – it's loud and dirty and full of far too many memories – but their onion rings are a rare indulgence. She can't even be put off by the fact that Emma had made some incomprehensible crack about ogres when she ordered them.

"You supported me through my first – and hopefully last – on-the-job emotional breakdown," Emma points out. "And you've been really cool about the whole gay partner thing."

"Did you expect that I would have a problem with it?"

The blonde shrugs. "I wasn't sure, you know? I've never really come out at work before. You and Jones have both been totally fine, but you never know who'll turn out to be homophobic."

"Well, I'd like to believe I don't suffer from any phobias," Regina says stiffly, pained at the thought of anyone treating her partner with anything less than the respect she deserves, and also, for some reason, at the idea that Emma had trusted Jones with this information first, "but if I did, homosexuals would certainly not be one of them."

Emma laughs loudly at that, throwing her head back in genuine mirth, and Regina feels her cheeks flush. Unsure of what she said wrong, she chews on her lower lip and looks down at fidgeting hands, but she breathes a sigh of relief when Emma playfully punches her in the shoulder and says, "That sounds like something that should get printed on a t-shirt."

"Perhaps I'll pursue a career in design when I finally retire from the force," she jokes. A small smile involuntarily creeps across her lips, but she quickly grows serious again and softly tells her partner, "I hope...I hope you haven't had to deal with too many weak-minded people in the past."

When the expression on Emma's face makes it clear that she has, Regina feels her stomach clench. She reaches tentatively across the table to pat her hand, but the younger woman shrugs and pulls away, seemingly unreceptive to comfort.

"It's not – I mean, it was a long time ago," Emma says uneasily. "Mostly, like, back in high school before I had even figured it all out. Just one psycho-religious foster family and a few bullies here and there. I mean, compared to what some people have to deal with, it was nothing. And then...well, I really haven't had many issues since I made it to adulthood."

"I...that's...I'm glad," Regina says. "That it got better for you." But her voice catches in her throat because, glad as she is, her heart still blazes with fury on behalf of teenage Emma, so confused and afraid, with no one there to support her. She wants to weep for her, to travel back in time and shower that young girl with unconditional love and tell her that she's absolutely perfect. And then another part of her wants to track down every single person who had ever harmed her partner and make them pay.

She has a feeling that Dr. Hopper would likely classify the latter of those thoughts as "unhealthy."

"...I really do think the world is changing, though," Emma is saying. "Yeah, it's slow, and there are still a lot of...problems, I guess. But, I don't know - I've seen so much improvement, even in the last decade since I first came out. That could just be because we live in Boston, though."

"Possibly," Regina agrees noncommittally, because she really knows nothing about the situation. There was a time when she did – a time when she had enough mental and emotional energy to be concerned with things like politics and social activism – but that was...well, it was over a decade ago. Before her every thought became consumed trying to forget one terrible night that would never be forgotten. In retrospect, perhaps community involvement might have helped, but she supposes it's too late for regrets now.

"I mean, probably the worst reaction I've gotten from anyone I've told was my son's father," Emma continues. "And that was because he was in love with me or something like that. It was also the same time I told him I was pregnant, which, in hindsight, was probably a bad plan. One bombshell per day, right?" she adds with a short laugh.

Regina stares at her hands. "I'm sorry," she murmurs.

"Hey, we got over it. He's moved on. We're friends-ish. I mean, it's all about Henry now, you know? We just...we didn't want him to grow up like we did. And if that means working together..."

"You mean, in the foster system?" Regina asks.

"Yeah."

"Was that...was that difficult for you?"

Emma shrugs. "Yeah, kind of. I mean, if you're not one of the kids who's lucky enough to get adopted, then you pretty much spend your life getting shuffled around, feeling unwanted. Even the good families...they're only temporary, you know? They're not *yours*."

Regina stares into her partner's eyes and thinks, for just an instant, she truly does see a window into her soul. It's a lonely soul, filled with pain

and turmoil, so very like and unlike her own all at once.

But it's only an instant, and then Emma is blinking and turning away, walls back up. "But I survived," she says quickly. "And so did Neal. We both made something of ourselves, and we might not be perfect parents all the time, but at least our son has never felt unwanted for even a second."

"I'm sure you're good parents," Regina reassures her with a sad smile. "It sounds like you love your son very much."

Emma shoves another fry in her mouth and mutters, "Sorry I've been rambling."

"No need to apologize, dear."

"No, I feel guilty. I mean, first I forced you to come to the bar with me, then I just spent the last half hour boring you with rants about my life."

"First of all," Regina declares, "no one forces me to do anything against my will. I came here with you because I wanted to. Furthermore, had I found the conversation topic even the slightest bit boring, I would have said so."

"Really?" Emma looks surprised. "You just...you didn't seem to be saying much."

"I was listening."

"Oh. Well...um...thanks, then. Thank you for listening. I haven't really said most of that stuff to anyone before."

"You're welcome. And, Emma, I know that our job can be...emotionally taxing. If there's ever anything - work-related or otherwise - that's bothering you, I hope you know that I'm here to listen, support...whatever you need. If you'll let me."

The moment the words are out of her mouth, she can't believe she said them, but she doesn't want to take them back. The fact that, in spite of all her years of experience, she's not even capable of emotionally supporting *herself* seems insignificant when she sees the expression on Emma's face, joyful and teary and vulnerable and strong all at once.

"Thanks, Regina," she says with a genuine smile. "And, for what it's worth, the same goes for you. I mean, partners always have each other's backs, right?"

"Right," Regina agrees. This time, it's Emma who reaches out her hand. As they lace their fingers together, elbows resting on the sticky tabletop, Regina could swear she feels warmth and light coursing through her entire body, slowly melting away the layers of icy armor surrounding

her heart. And as her partner's bright eyes meet her own, the sounds and smells of the bar seem to fade away, surrounding both of them with a warm glow that both sends tingles down Regina's arms and makes her feel perfectly safe. She gazes deeply into Emma's eyes, trying to see into her soul once again for some indication this sensation is mutual.

Then she feels the fingers interlaced with hers slowly tighten, and sees Emma's chest rise and fall as she takes a shaky breath, and knows that she feels it too.

The next week-and-a-half is filled with boredom, a feeling for which Emma has never felt more grateful. Days of paperwork for both their cases - making sure it's absolutely perfect so nothing goes wrong at all the pre-trial hearings, interrupted by a few calls to check out unattended deaths that Whale ends up ruling natural or accidental. Mary Margaret comes by almost every day to go over witness statements, evidence. Apparently, the Brown family hired their son a top-notch defense lawyer. Tony Wilson, on the other hand, is making do with an inexperienced attorney from Legal Aid. Mary Margaret mutters something about inequality that Regina counters with the pronouncement that she'd like to put her gun to both of their heads and make the trial unnecessary. After that, the ADA is quiet and tense through most of their interactions.

Then again, Mary Margaret has a lot on her plate. She's stressed about this shooting case and she's stressed about the Glass trial and the press crawling up her office's ass on a daily basis, and apparently the elections for a new DA are coming up, so she's stressed about that, too. Emma thinks that maybe she should do ADA Blanchard a favor and ask Regina to lay off.

After their talk at the bar, Emma thinks she feels a shift in her relationship with her partner. It's subtle, little things that might have escaped her notice if it were anyone besides the legendary hardass Regina Mills doing them. It's quick pats on the shoulder accompanied by private glances to check if she's okay whenever Mary Margaret leaves or something about the shooting plays on the news. It's the Evil Queen glare of death and snappy comebacks whenever someone makes even a hint of a homophobic remark. It's genuine good mornings and how are yous and careful remembrance of answers from the day before.

Regina is obviously taking her role as mentor very seriously.

It's enough that Emma feels comfortable enough to say one evening, after Mary Margaret leaves (head down and briefcase clutched tightly to her chest after Regina had made some dig about how she was probably just going to throw the case because she thinks mass murderers deserve second chances), "Hey, that was kind of a low blow."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Regina says stiffly.

"What you said to Mary Margaret just now. It was kind of...I mean, I know you hate her, for whatever reason, and you're certainly entitled to your feelings. It's just...you know, she's got a lot on her plate right now. Maybe you could ease up a little. At least, like, during all this pre-trial stuff."

Regina shoots Emma a glare that looks more uncomfortable than angry. "I do not hate Miss Blanchard."

"Could have fooled me. I mean, you kind of hate everyone, but it seems to come out extra strong with her."

"I don't," Regina insists. "I merely..."

She sighs heavily and looks at Emma with such incredible heartbreak that the younger woman almost feels guilty although she's the one entirely guiltless and uninvolved party in whatever went wrong with that relationship.

"You're right," she finally says sadly. "Perhaps I have been unfairly taking out my anger on Mary Margaret. I don't...I don't *hate* her. It's complicated." She sounds as though it's a struggle to convince herself of that.

"What did she do to you?" Emma asks curiously.

Regina sighs. "As I said, it's complicated." She checks her watch and sighs again. "I'll apologize to her tomorrow. Are you going to go home?"

Emma shrugs. They've been playing this game for a few days now. She finds herself craving more and more time with Regina: showing up five, even ten minutes early for their morning runs, making excuses to linger over stretching, passing up on trips to the bar with the guys in order to stay late at work, even when there's nothing much left to be done. She's not sure how to account for her behavior; in her head, she explains it as enjoyment of newfound friendship. The crazy part is that Regina seems to be doing the same thing.

But whatever this sudden connection between the two of them is, whatever bond they're developing, it's not enough that Emma actually expects her partner to make good on her vow of apologizing to Mary Margaret.

So she's quite surprised the next morning when ADA Blanchard walks into the squad room, arms full of files, and Regina is the one who immediately walks over to help with them, beating even Nolan to the task.

"Miss Blanchard," she says uneasily, "I'd like to take back the comment I made last night. It was uncalled for. I'm...I'm very sorry. It won't happen again."

Mary Margaret looks shocked, Regina's fellow detectives even moreso.

"Hey, nice job," Emma says later when they're alone. "That was...that was really big of you."

"Well, I didn't do it for your approval," Regina growls, storming out of the squad room. But she's back fifteen minutes later, acting like none of it ever happened.

On the Monday after the shooting, Emma gets a call from Neal just as she walks into the station.

"Hello?" she snaps, instantly on high alert. "Is everything alright? How's Henry?"

"Everything is fine," Neal says calmly. "I just called to check in on you, see how you're doing. You seemed really upset last week, and you haven't spoken to me since then, and I just thought-"

"Of course I was upset," Emma grumbles. "Five kids got killed."

"But you're okay now?"

"I'm better, yeah. I don't know if it's possible to be okay after seeing something like that. Why are you calling me at work?"

"Um, it's kind of an awkward situation," Neal begins slowly, "but one I think you'll actually like. You remember my old foster sister Wendy?"

"The one who's dating that crazy guy? Who looks like she's twelve or something? I'm familiar with her."

"Yeah, that's the one. It turns out she's breaking up with him."

"Finally," Emma groans. "I wonder who talked some sense into her. Was it you? If so, you're a god."

"It wasn't me. But, anyway, she needs to use my truck to move her stuff out of his place next weekend - possibly also my bodyguard duties, I'm not sure. So, I was thinking maybe while I'm helping her with whatever she needs, Henry could spend the weekend with you?" he suggests tentatively.

Emma feels her entire face light up. "What? Are you serious? You *are* a god."

"I want that in writing," Neal jokes. "Yeah, I'll drive the truck up next Friday after he gets out of school, have him at your place by the time you're off work. Unless you're on call or something."

"Pretty sure I'm not. Hey, Mills!" Emma calls across the lobby to her partner who's just walked in the door. "We're not on call this weekend, right?"

"No, Locksley's angry at Jones and Nolan again."

"Shit, those two can't seem to catch a break," Emma chuckles. "I almost feel bad for them." Returning to her call, she informs Neal, "Yeah, I'm free next weekend. Tell Wendy she's a strong woman and I admire the crap out of her. I'll make her a cake or something."

Neal chuckles. "I'll tell her. Maybe skip the cake, though. Nothing says 'I admire you' quite like giving someone food poisoning."

"Well, now I'm offended," Emma sniffs. "Betty Crocker and I are a great team – we've never given anyone food poisoning together."

"I'll call on Wednesday or Thursday to iron out the details," Neal promises. "Have a good day, Emma."

"You, too!" she asks enthusiastically, hanging up the phone and whipping around to face a perplexed Mills standing weirdly close to her. "Good morning, partner," she says with a slight gasp. "You startled me a little bit there."

"You're awfully upbeat today," the older woman comments, choosing not to address the uncomfortable lack of distance between them.

"That was my son's father. He needs to come up to Boston to help his foster sister move her stuff out of an abusive ex's place and probably, like, provide emotional support. Which means Henry gets to stay with me!" she exclaims, practically dancing with happiness.

"Emma, that's wonderful," Regina says with a bright smile. There's the same wistful look in her eyes she always gets when Henry comes up. Maybe one day, Emma will find the courage to ask about it, but that day is not today, and it probably won't be tomorrow either.

"Yeah," she replies carefully. "We agreed once a month, so two weeks is, like, two times better."

"It's exactly two times better, actually."

Emma blushes. "Is this you trying to suggest that I say 'like' too much?"

"Possibly," Regina admits. "But you're free to use whatever words suit you. Let's get to work."

Emma shrugs and follows her partner to the elevator.

Emma's fitness is improving. It's not something she notices on a regular basis, but it becomes very apparent on one morning run – the day Henry is supposed to come - when Regina lets her set the pace for a change. She's shocked to see that the other woman actually seems tired at the end of it, when she typically looks like she could keep going for another ten miles.

"This was a fast morning," Regina comments breathlessly, checking her watch as she gradually slows to a walk. "We averaged under eight-minute miles."

Emma splashes some water on her face and grins. "I'm no running expert, but that's decent, right?"

"Well, we won't be mistaken for Paula Radcliffe any time soon, but it's not bad, especially given your lack of training."

"What do you mean, 'my lack of training?'" Emma demands. "I've been training for almost a month now! And with a pretty good coach, I might add."

"I don't know what you're hoping to gain through flattery, dear, but I suggest you give it up."

"I was hoping if I buttered you up enough, you'd let me choose where we eat lunch for once," Emma admits. "I'm getting sick of that deli where all the sandwiches have sprouts on them."

"I ordered pizza once!" Regina argues. "And athletes need to eat lean proteins and vegetables. If you're serious about training for that marathon-"

"Yeah, yeah," Emma interrupts. "One time! After I cried in the bathroom and you felt sorry for me, but for obvious reasons, I'd prefer not to repeat those circumstances."

Regina huffs and straightens her hair. "Maybe you'd better start buttering me up a bit more, then. You should know that I don't give in easily."

Emma stares at her partner in momentary confusion. *Was that flirting?* she wonders. No, it couldn't be. Sometimes it's impossible to tell what's going on with Mills, though. She's not sure there's a strong enough word to describe the level of enigma the senior detective has perfected.

"Hey," she says suddenly, an idea popping into her head, "since we ran so fast today, can I treat you to coffee or something before work?"

Regina checks her watch again – as if the time would have changed significantly in the two minutes or so since she last looked at it – and shrugs.

"Why not?"

They finish stretching (Regina insists that it's the most important part of the workout and can't be cut short, much to Emma's annoyance) and make their way to the nearest Dunkin' Donuts.

"Want to play a game where we try to guess each other's favorite donuts?" Emma asks.

"We could, but that would be an awfully boring game, because I don't like donuts."

"What the hell? Of course you do; you're a cop."

"Perhaps," Regina concedes, "but not these. There's a small donut shop near my hometown that has delicious homemade apple cider donuts. They're actually made with homegrown apples from my family's orchard: much better than all this industrially-processed garbage."

"She doesn't mean that," Emma assures the employee sweeping the floor, who isn't listening anyway. "Your hometown, huh? Where is that?"

"Storybrooke, Maine. It's about a half hour north of Portland."

Emma nods and files away the information in her brain. "How did you end up in Boston?"

"College," Regina says shortly. "You're certainly curious this morning."

"Well, I just thought...now that you know so much about me, maybe I could know some things about you, too?" Emma suggests in her sweetest tone. "I know you're into the whole 'Woman of Mystery' act at work, but we *are* partners."

"We are," Regina agrees. "Fine. What do you want to know."

There's a moment – just a moment, but it's there – when Emma swears she sees a flash of panic, of paralyzing fear, in her partner's eyes. *That's weird*, she thinks, but it's not unthinkable that Regina might have demons in her past that she doesn't want to discuss. Emma herself certainly knows what that's like. She starts with something simple. "Which college?" she asks casually. "Probably something extra prestigious, right? Harvard?"

"Wellesley, actually."

"Wellesley?" Emma exclaims – far too loudly for the size of the establishment, she realizes as soon as the word leaves her mouth.

"Large coffee, black," Regina says with an apologetic smile to the young woman behind the counter. "And whatever this ill-mannered idiot is having."

"I'll have the same, and a chocolate glazed – hey!" she protests indignantly when she sees Regina reach into her jacket pocket. "I said I was treating you. That means *I* pay."

"Fine. Pay."

"I'm about to."

The cashier looks confusedly between the two detectives before finally smirking. "That'll be $4.50, whichever one of you is paying."

Emma gives her a five dollar bill and sticks her tongue out at Regina. The cashier rolls her eyes as she hands over their order and change.

"You are a child. I'm asking Locksley for a new partner today."

"Yeah, I'll believe that when I see it," Emma snorts, passing one of the coffees to Regina and taking a large bite of her donut. "Anyway, let's get back on topic - you went to Wellesley?"

"Yes. Is that so difficult for you to believe?"

"No, not at all," Emma says quickly, "now that I think about it. It's just...you were a Wellesley girl!" she bursts out.

"I prefer 'woman' these days, but yes, we've just established that."

"I know, it's just...Wellesley girls – women – Wellesley women are hot!" Emma finally sputters.

That brings a burst of laughter out of the brunette. "What? Do you even know any Wellesley women?"

"Of course I do. Just because I went to night school, doesn't mean I've never rubbed elbows with the upper crust. Before this homicide gig started taking up all of my time, I used to frequent a couple of Boston-area lesbian bars," Emma informs her partner haughtily. "Wellesley women love lesbian bars."

"I...I didn't..." Regina mumbles, obviously flustered. "I certainly didn't mean to imply-"

"Not to mention Hillary Clinton, the entire cast of *Mona Lisa Smile*..."

"Stop right there," Regina orders. "That movie is an incredibly unrealistic and offensive portrayal of my alma mater, and I will not discuss it any further. Besides, I'm virtually certain that you do not personally know Hillary Clinton - who, by the way, is old enough to be your mother, so it's slightly disturbing that you find her attractive."

"Age is just a number," Emma says with a shrug. "I mean, it's *Hillary Clinton*."

"Fine. By all means, continue this ridiculous rant," Regina sighs.

Emma holds the door open and follows Regina outside. "I hope this isn't, like, offensive to you. I don't mean to generalize, or objectify your fellow alumnae or anything."

"I'd like to think I'm not so easily offended."

"It's just...I find smart women very attractive," Emma continues, wondering why the hell her mouth won't stop talking already. "But if this is making you uncomfortable, I can shut up. Don't worry, I'm not trying to say I'm into you or anything. I mean – well, objectively speaking, you *are* a very attractive woman, not to mention badass, which adds to the appeal, and the Wellesley degree brings you up to, like, an eleven out of ten, but-"

"Emma," Regina hisses through gritted teeth. "Just stop."

Emma's eyes widen, horrified, as she takes in the pained expression in her partner's eyes, the rigid set of her jaw. "Oh, god, Regina, I'm so sorry," she breathes.

"It's fine. I'm not...I'm not *uncomfortable*." She spits the word out like it's distasteful to her.

"I'm sorry," Emma says again. "I guess it's been a while since I've had anyone I could be open with, you know, and I just got a little too open."

But then again, she doesn't really know what she said that could possibly have caused such *sadness* in Regina's eyes. Annoyance, yes. Her words may have come across as flirtatious, and she's learned the hard way that straight women don't always like it when she flirts with them, but...unless it was the part about *not* being into her. But, no, that couldn't be it. Regina's not – she isn't...

Is she?

That's the only option that makes any sense, but it's just not possible.

"Don't worry about it, dear," Regina orders, her face once again calm and composed as she takes a sip of her coffee. Only the slightest wisp of a shadow behind her steady gaze belies the bright smile she forces across her lips as she says, "I'll see you at the station in an hour or so."

"Later," Emma mumbles, taking off down the sidewalk in the direction of her apartment. She shrugs off the strangeness of the last moment of her conversation with her partner. One thing is certain: that woman is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside of a...well, inside of a gorgeous face and smokin' hot body that Emma, if she's being honest with herself, would totally be into if it weren't so entirely off-limits as to not be worth her consideration.

She doesn't look behind her, so she doesn't see the way that Regina is staring at her retreating back with a mixture of longing and confusion. Instead, she finishes off her donut and blithely looks forward to her weekend with Henry.

It's early in the afternoon on an uneventful Friday, and Regina has just taken a bite of her turkey sandwich – she has to admit that she privately agrees with Emma about the sprouts, but she's learned not to take her health for granted – when the detectives get a call about a body floating in the harbor. Nolan looks like he's about to vomit.

"Hey, since you guys are on this weekend, maybe Mills and I can take the crime scene for you," Emma offers.

"That would be nice," Jones says gratefully, shooting a sideways glance at his partner. "I'd prefer not to ruin another pair of my shoes with Nolan's lunch, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I mean, if that's alright with you, Regina," Emma quickly adds. "I didn't mean to just-"

"Well, you did *just*," Regina says accusingly, though she's mostly just teasing, and Emma responds with a smirk. She quickly throws her blazer over one shoulder and grabs her car keys, following the blonde

out the door. "You have some sort of fascination with floaters?" she asks as they walk into the sunlight.

"No, I just wanted to get out of that damn squad room," Emma admits. "I don't understand how some people can do desk jobs full time."

"Isn't that what you were doing? In your previous position?"

"Why do you think I requested a transfer so quickly?"

"Point taken," Regina says with a tight-lipped smile.

"Look, Regina, about this morning," Emma begins as soon as the car doors are shut, "I really didn't mean any – I wasn't trying to-"

"Of course. And I...I just took something you said the wrong way for a second," Regina says quickly. There is nothing else; there's no other option. "There's no need to worry."

Emma wrings her hands and awkwardly looks down. "Right, I know. It's just...I do."

"You do? You do what?"

"Worry. I do worry...about you," she says softly. "Sometimes."

And there it is again, that warmth spreading through her middle that's pleasant and exciting and so terribly confusing all at once. She can't decide if it's a blessing or a curse.

"I mean, I would hate to think anything I said hurt your feelings. I feel like we're becoming friends, you know? And I would hate to ruin that."

It's a curse.

"Friends?" Regina asks. Her voice comes out tight and strangled.

Friends. Of course they're friends. Friends go running together and talk and joke and watch each other's backs, she remembers, though it's been quite some time since she's truly had one. Friends are good – Dr. Hopper says she needs them. And now she's found one.

So why does it feel so woefully inadequate?

She can't do this. She can't have these feelings – whatever they are. They're thoroughly inappropriate and she's not equipped to deal with them.

"Friends," Emma confirms. "If you'll have me, that is."

For a second, Emma looks terrified, like she's expecting her offer to be rudely rejected, and the sight of such vulnerability on the younger woman's face is enough to pull Regina out of her own mess of intermingled feelings almost instantly. "Of course I will," she declares, all latent longing for anything else instantly vanishing.

Emma lights up, flashing Regina a huge smile. "Okay, then, friend, do you mind if I turn on the radio?"

Dr. Whale and two Harbor Patrol officers are conferring together out at the edge of a dock when Emma and Regina arrive. "Mills, Swan," the Medical Examiner says with a friendly nod.

"What have we got?" asks Regina.

"Female, thirties or possibly early forties, pulled in about half an hour ago," Whale explains, with a quick glance at Harbor Patrol to confirm the timing.

"How long had she been...floating?" asks Emma.

"Difficult to say – the water's cold and slows decomposition. Based on the discoloration of her skin and the state of her body tissues, I'd say it's been more than three weeks, but it's difficult to tell how much more."

He unzips the body bag and Emma feels bile rise in the back of her throat at the sight of the victim's face. "Yep, that body's been in the water a while," she agrees, taking in the greenish-brown skin and the places where fish have bitten parts of her cheeks and lips. She thinks she understands Nolan's reluctance to come to the crime scene.

"I assume she didn't happen to have an ID in her pocket when you pulled her up?" Regina asks sarcastically. Whale nods. "We'll have to wait for DNA testing on the remains, then," the senior detective muses. "I doubt we'll be able to get any fingerprints off of her.

"Seems unlikely. And she doesn't appear to have had a whole lot of dental care, so not much chance of ID-ing her through dental records."

"I know you haven't done the autopsy yet, but are we looking at a standard drowning?" Regina asks briskly.

"Funny you should ask. Take a closer look at her forehead."

Emma leans in as close as she's willing to – not very far – and thinks she sees a small hole there. Regina leans closer and says, "That's a gunshot wound."

"I'll have to confirm, but it looks that way. It's about the size of a .22 caliber bullet."

"So, she might not have drowned. She might have gotten her brains blown out," Emma mutters to herself. "Lovely."

"Of course, this had to come on a Friday afternoon," Whale grumbles. "I'll start processing the body right away and let you know if there's anything that might help ID her faster."

After several hours of scouring a year's worth of missing person reports from eastern Massachusetts, southern Maine, Rhode Island, and

Connecticut, they've come up with nothing and Regina runs her fingers through her hair with an angry sigh. She's called Whale to ask him to put a rush on processing the DNA, but they will won't have an ID for twenty-four hours or so. And that's if she's even in any databases.

"Come on!" Nolan mutters. "Someone *has* to have reported her missing."

"She could have come from somewhere further away," Jones suggests. "Larger ships from all the way up and down the eastern seaboard pass through Boston – she could be from Florida, Nova Scotia...we might have to expand our search."

Emma shrugs. "She could have just not had anyone in her life who cared enough to report her missing."

Nolan and Regina both swallow hard and look down, while Jones regards the facial reconstruction sketch the morgue sent up with an appraising eye. "I find it hard to believe a woman who looked like that wouldn't be missed."

"Dude, no," Emma says with a vehement shake of her head. "Just...no." Jones raises his hands in surrender.

"So, we'll expand the search to all eastern seaboard states, going back...two years?" Nolan grumbles, quickly typing something into his computer. "Maybe I'll extend the age range, too, just in case."

"I'll fax the sketch to the Canadian authorities," Emma says helpfully. "I've always wanted to talk to a Mountie." Regina smirks and rolls her eyes.

Just as Emma is about to leave the room, her phone starts ringing and she stares at it, wide-eyed. "Shit!" she exclaims before picking it up and saying with obviously forced calm, "Hey, Neal."

Of course, Regina remembers, checking her watch. *It's Friday evening. Emma's son...*

"Yeah, Neal, I know. There's just something that came up at work. This woman – yeah I can still take Henry this weekend, I'm just not going to be home in the next fifteen minutes, that's all. Can you just-"

"You're free to go," Regina offers. "This technically isn't our case."

At the exact same time, Jones loudly suggests, "Have him bring the boy to the station!"

Naturally, it's Jones that Emma hears first. "Really?" she asks eagerly, quickly covering the receiver with her hand. "Is that allowed?"

"Sure," he says brightly, and Nolan nods along behind him. "Impromptu Take Your Son to Work Day. Locksley does it all the time."

"It's not like what we're doing right now is particularly confidential or traumatizing," Nolan adds with a shrug.

"Great. Hey, Neal, why don't you drop Henry off at the station? I can show him around, finish up, and then take him home from here."

Regina leans heavily against the back of her chair with a sigh. She'd been an idiot to think she could avoid this forever.

"Okay, awesome. See you in fifteen."

She hangs up and turns back to the other detectives with an excited smile. "Thanks, guys. This really means a lot to me."

"No problem," Nolan and Jones immediately say in unison.

Regina forces a smile and nods, trying desperately to ignore the fact that her heart is thumping with apprehension inside a chest that's tightening so much that it's difficult to breathe. This isn't some kind of monster or demon that's coming to visit them, she reminds herself. It's just Emma's son.

Emma's ten-year-old son whose name just happens to be Henry.

He arrives far too soon for her liking, bouncing into the squad room with his overstuffed backpack and an adorable, inquisitive face that looks a whole lot like Emma's.

Jones and Nolan take to him immediately, fighting over who gets to give him the grand tour while talking over each other to explain what it is they're currently attempting to do. Emma leans against the wall and chuckles.

"So, this is what we think she looked like," Nolan says, "and we're looking through Missing Persons reports to see if anyone matches her description while we wait for the DNA tests to come back."

"Why don't you check her fingerprints?" he asks curiously.

"Hard to check fingerprints when a body's been submerged for that long," Jones explains while Nolan turns green again. "If you know what I mean."

"Oh...right." Henry looks a little sick himself.

"Hey, kid, you brought a book, right?" Emma cuts in. "How about you sit and read for a few minutes while I finish up what I'm doing. Or, you can look on the internet for good restaurants," she adds with a wink. "My desk is right here."

"Okay," Henry says agreeably, plopping down on Emma's chair. Regina has never felt strongly one way or the other about the fact that her partner's desk is right across from hers, but she's internally cursing the arrangement as she looks up directly into his bright green eyes, so similar to his mother's. He smiles at her a little shyly and says "hi" like it's the simplest thing in the world.

"Hello," Regina murmurs, quickly pulling her hands off her desk and sitting on them so he won't see how they're trembling.

"You must be Detective Mills."

"I...yes, I am. H-how did you know that?" Regina stammers.

Henry shrugs. "Well, you're the only other woman in the room besides my mom. Also, there's a nametag on your desk. Anyway, it's nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"And I, you," she just barely manages to choke out, staring at the hand he's just extended across the desk for her to shake. She clenches her right fist under her leg and then relaxes it, silently begging her body to get back under control.

It's Emma's easy humor that saves her. "I haven't talked about her that much!" she exclaims.

Henry rolls his eyes at his mom. "More than you've talked about anyone else."

"Shhh..." Emma teases. "Don't let Nolan and Jones hear you say that."

"Say what now?" Jones demands.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Let's get back to work, slacker." She laughs and shoves him back toward Nolan's desk. "Get to work on that research, kid," she calls back to Henry. "I'm starving!"

"So," Henry says once his mother is occupied, "I hear you're one of the best detectives in BPD."

Regina's cheeks flush. "I don't know about that," she says quietly.

"My mom says so, anyway."

The blush spreads down her neck, and she's pretty sure she's starting to sweat. "That's very kind of her."

"Yeah, she was really excited to get a chance to work with you. I think she likes you a lot."

Her entire body feels like it's on fire. "Aren't you supposed to be researching dinner options?" she demands.

Henry cocks his head to one side and raises his eyebrows at her. "I'm just gonna look at Google Maps for the nearest pizza place," he says with a shrug. "Mom and I always get pizza. Dad makes me eat vegetables."

"Vegetables are good for you," Regina scolds. "I've been trying to teach your mother the same thing."

Henry laughs. "Good luck with that. But if she listens to anyone, it'd probably be you."

Regina feels a bit light-headed – if she wasn't already sitting down, she might have keeled over by now. She grabs the bottle of water next to her computer and presses it to her forehead. She thinks perhaps she's coming down with something. Wonderful, just the way she wanted to spend her weekend off: lying on the couch, plagued by feverish nightmares with no means of distracting herself.

But no, she's not sick. The feeling fades as soon as she takes a deep breath and stares numbly at her computer screen for a few moments. Away from Emma, away from Henry. Her heart rate is still unnaturally elevated, but it's better. She's better.

"Hey, kid, you ready? Did you pick a place?"

"It says there's an Alberti's Pizzeria two blocks from here," Henry says proudly. "Good reviews. Want to check it out?"

"I think – hey, Regina, that's the pizza place we ordered from last week, isn't it?" Emma asks. "That was awesome pizza."

"Yes, it was," Regina replies in a voice she hopes is carefree and composed. "It was quite good," she tells Henry. "I think you'll like it."

"Cool. Do you want to come with us?"

"I...I, uh..." Regina stutters, glancing between mother and son in confusion. She digs her fingernails into the bottom of the chair in a futile attempt to ground herself. "I couldn't...I wouldn't want to-"

"It'll be fun," Henry says, seemingly unaware of the turmoil she's going through. "You can tell me embarrassing stories about my mom. I'm sure you have some by now."

"You're welcome to come with us, Regina." Emma's looking at her worriedly, searching her face for a reason behind whatever emotion she currently sees on it. "It's been a long week; you should probably start getting home soon, anyway."

She can't do this – she can't sit here under the scrutiny of not one but two sets of wide green eyes, pretending that everything's fine and normal when inside there's an army of a thousand different emotions trying to tear her into tiny little pieces.

No. No, thank you, says her mind.

"Okay," says her traitorous mouth.

Regina sits across from Emma and Henry, half-listening to their conversation in awkward silence, half-staring at her hands ripping her pizza to shreds on her plate, trying desperately to contain the anxiety that's been bubbling up inside of her ever since she first heard Emma say Henry's name on the phone. She shouldn't have come. She's...this –

this is so far outside her comfort zone that she has absolutely no idea what to do with herself.

It shouldn't be, though, or that's what she tells herself. After all, she sees Emma practically every day. And it's not as if she's afraid of kids. In fact, she's quite good with them. She's nearly always the one tasked with interviewing child witnesses when the need arises, though she supposes that's quite different from interacting with them socially.

Still, she spends quite a bit of time with Roland. Then again, they're usually at the station or the Locksleys' apartment, never in public and rarely without Robin there to jump in if it starts to starts to become more than she can handle.

Normally, she hates him for it. Hates that he makes her feel weak, like she needs someone to take care of her. She always demands to know what he thinks would happen if he'd just let her handle it on her own.

Panic attacks, apparently, like the one she's on the verge of right now.

And now, the source of all her current anxiety is talking to her.

"So, Det – Regina," he begins. She'd told him in the car to call her Regina. "My mom says you two go running together."

"Yes, we do," she confirms, placing one hand on her stomach and pressing against it with her breath the way Dr. Hopper had taught her. *In. Out*. Deep, slow breaths, from the diaphragm.

"She says she can run ten miles without stopping and that she's training for a marathon. Is that true?"

His tone is accusing, like he's hoping to catch his mother in a lie, and Regina almost chuckles. *In. Out. In. Out.* "Actually, yes," she says, with a glance at Emma, who looks at the uneaten slice of pizza on Regina's plate and her hand resting on her stomach and mouths, *You sick?* She shakes her head and forces a smile. "She's becoming reasonably fast, too."

"No way!" Henry exclaims. "How much is she paying you to lie for her?"

In. Out. In. Out. Slowly but surely, her heart rate is slowing and her lungs are beginning to expand more easily. This is better. She's okay. She can do this. "Well, there was that coffee she bought me this morning," she teases.

Emma gives an exaggerated gasp. "Hey! This is so not fair! My own kid and my partner ganging up on me? Thanks a lot, guys."

Henry laughs so beautifully that Regina feels her own face alight. *In. Out.* She takes the risk of removing her hand from her stomach and

reaching it across the table to pat Emma's in a mock soothing gesture. "But my integrity can't be bought so easily," she informs the boy. "Your mother is actually a decent runner. I expect she'll be able to finish the marathon strongly if she keeps up her training."

"So there," Emma says smugly, turning her hand over to curl her fingers around Regina's. *You sure you're okay?* she mouths. The senior detective swallows hard and nods; Emma flashes her a smile and gives her hand a soft squeeze, causing Regina to blink in confusion. Emma doesn't know – she can't know. But maybe she doesn't have to.

"Since I'm a 'decent runner,'" the blonde continues, "maybe you shouldn't be bringing home notes from your gym teacher about your poor attitude. Yeah, you better believe your dad told me about that."

"Can I help it if I'm not interested in cup-stacking races?" Henry demands.

"No, but you can refrain from making sassy comments about it within earshot of your teacher. Is that too much to ask?"

"What are cup-stacking races?" Regina asks bewilderedly.

"Exactly what they sound like," Emma informs her. "All the rage for building kids' dexterity and fine motor skills."

"And their boredom," grumbles Henry, causing his mother to smirk and look at him with a loving mix of pride and consternation.

"That sounds like a complete waste of time," Regina comments. Her elementary school P.E. class had mostly consisted of running obstacle courses through the forest, and she'd loved it.

Henry looks her up and down in approval, eyes lingering for a moment on the hand that's still joined with Emma's. "I like you," he declares. "Mom, can we keep her?"

"Thanks a lot, Regina. He'll never listen to me, now that the legendary Detective Mills agrees with him. Listen up, kid. You're allowed to think whatever you want about your school curriculum, but you've gotta learn to keep it to yourself."

"That's true," Regina agrees. "A lot of times, people in power don't like being told they're wrong."

Henry scowls at both of them. "I still don't understand why I can't learn cool stuff at school. Like riding a horse."

"Probably because they're teaching you to be an employable citizen of the twenty-first century, not a medieval knight."

"But my employment is going to be writing," he protests. "And I need to know what riding a horse feels like, for my book."

"I could teach you" comes out of Regina's mouth before she even realizes what's happening. Mother and son stare at her with identical expressions of shock.

Henry exclaims, awestruck, "You can ride horses?" at the same time Emma asks, "When and where are you going to get a horse for him to ride?"

"Um..." Regina fumbles for a moment. Henry's question is easier. "Yes, I can. I grew up with horses, and I competed in equestrian throughout high school and college. As for when and where, well..."

Maybe she should have thought this through before opening her mouth.

"My parents have horses. It's...it's a bit far, to their place," she backtracks. "About a two and a half hour drive, but...if you wanted to, I suppose..."

"Cool," says Henry. He turns big, pleading eyes toward Emma. "Mom, can we? Please?"

"This weekend?" Emma questions. "That's kind of...we wouldn't want to impose on your family or anything..."

"It wouldn't be an imposition," Regina says quickly. "My mother has been pressuring me to visit for quite some time, and this seems like a way to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak." Henry can learn to ride a horse; she can claim to be doing her duty like a good daughter without actually spending much time in her mother's presence. Save for the number of stressors she'd be introducing all at once – Dr. Hopper would likely not approve – it's a genius plan.

Emma purses her lips. "I don't know."

"It's your call, of course. I understand it's far; you may have other plans."

She's not sure whether the pleading look she shoots Emma is for a yes or no.

"We don't," says Henry. "She's just afraid of horses. Come on, Mom!"

"Oh," Regina murmurs. Of all the things to be afraid of... "Well, there's no need to worry. He'd only be allowed on the calmest, oldest, most even-tempered horse in the stable, and I'd be by his side every second. Of course, he'd also be wearing a helmet."

Why the hell is she doing this? Is this really what she wants? A full day of Henry and Emma and her mother, in Storybrooke of all places, where there's no way to escape?

"So, this is at your house?" Emma clarifies. "Your horses? You know all of them?"

Regina worries her lower lip with her teeth and nods.

Emma thinks for a moment. "Wait, so you have horses *and* an apple orchard?" she suddenly demands. "This must be quite the estate."

"It is rather large," Regina says uneasily.

"Hey, awesome! An orchard! Can we pick apples there, too?"

He looks just like an eager puppy for a moment, drawing laughter from both women. "Well, dear, they're not actually in season right now," Regina points out.

Henry's face falls. "Oh, right," he mumbles. "I knew that."

"Maybe, if you mind your manners and cut down on the bull-in-a-china-shop act, you can score an invitation back in the fall," Emma says with a smirk.

"I'm a bull in a china shop? You're the one who – wait does that mean we can go?"

Emma's eyes search Regina's, and when the brunette gives a reassuring nod, she mirrors the action. Henry pumps his fist in the air and smiles so brightly it renders all the lights in the restaurant unnecessary.

"Are you serious?" he asks Regina incredulously.

She nods again, and he launches out of his seat and throws his arms around her. "You're my favorite person in the world," he states.

"Hey, now!" Emma says with a laugh. "Someone's getting offended over here." Henry snorts and grabs the hand that isn't attached to Regina's, pulling his mom in to join the embrace. Regina is afraid she feels her chest tightening again, but she forces herself to breathe through it. *In. Out.* This isn't scary. This is...wonderful.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> Warning for some brief mentions of violence, but nothing particularly graphic.

Regina wakes up at four, drenched in cold sweat and heart pounding so intensely that she's worried it will wake her neighbors. It's the same nightmare as always, except instead of Leopold White holding a knife over her, it's her mother's head superimposed on his body, and instead of Daniel bleeding to death in her arms, it's Emma and Henry. *It's not real,* she tells herself. *That never happened.* But it doesn't make the vision any easier to bear.

She hugs a couch cushion against her chest and tries to blink back the hot tears beginning to leak out of her eyes. Taking deep breaths, or as deep as she can possibly manage under the circumstances, she counts backward from one hundred once and then twice. She's being ridiculous – it was just a dream. Her mother is not going to murder Emma and Henry. Her mother would never kill anyone, unless critical remarks suddenly become lethal (in which case, she'll massacre the entire world). Even so, this trip is a terrible idea. She's not sure what the hell was going through her head last night. Something about her partner or her partner's son or the combination of the two of them had taken away her ability to say no or to think reasonable thoughts. There's part of her, and it's so very convincing, that says to call Emma. Call her right now and tell her they can't do it. The visit to Storybrooke is off.

But then she sees the expression of joy and gratitude on Henry's face and feels his arms encircling her and thinks that whatever happens today will all be worth it, just for that moment. That moment that she wishes she could have over and over for the rest of her life.

Returning to sleep is an impossible fantasy, even though she knows she needs it. Confronting Cora Mills with anything less than her full wits is a recipe for disaster. So, with trembling fingers, she laces up her running shoes and hopes that several hours of pounding the pavement will somehow be enough to keep her functional.

It's 4:45 when Emma jerks awake and leaps out of bed, throwing on her running clothes in a matter of seconds and stuffing a protein bar into her mouth before a soft snore coming from Henry's room reminds her that she's not supposed to meet Regina at the river this morning. Instead, Regina is coming here at seven to take them to some crazy little town in Maine so one of Henry's lifelong dreams can come true.

She still can't quite believe it – that's got to be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for the kid. She's introduced Henry to her friends and coworkers before, and they usually get on reasonably well with him, but this...this is just extraordinary. When Henry wakes up – as he inevitably will in a few minutes – they'll have to talk about something nice to do to thank Regina.

For now, maybe she'll just watch him sleep for a while, her beautiful boy whose face she doesn't get to see nearly enough.

"Hey, Mom, what are you doing up?"

Or not.

"I could ask you the same," she notes, offering him her second protein bar, which he turns up his nose at. "Fine, I'll make scrambled eggs. You sleep well?" She already knows the answer – he's only been up for a minute and he's already buzzing with energy; there's no way he managed to keep his eyes shut for long with all that excitement.

"I slept okay," he lies as she starts greasing a frying pan. He perches on one of the stools on the kitchen counter, practically bouncing up and down. "Last night wasn't just a dream, was it?"

"If you're talking about the part where you got invited to go horseback-riding in Storybrooke, Maine, then no. Definitely not a dream – I was there."

He looks relieved for a moment before starting to bounce again. "Regina's probably a really good rider, right?"

Emma shrugs and starts cracking eggs. "I really have no idea – didn't even know she rode horses until yesterday, but I assume she's pretty decent if she competed."

"Cool. Do you think she'll teach me how to gallop? Or do jumps?"

"Umm..." Emma chuckles. "Listen, kid, I don't know much about learning to ride horses – you know that – but I don't think going full-tilt-boogie is really a first day thing."

Henry puffs out his chest and glares at her. "I'm a fast learner."

"Yes, you are," she agrees. "When it suits you."

"Whatever." He sticks out his tongue at her and pretends to sulk for a minute before immediately re-energizing and hopping around the kitchen. "Regina's pretty awesome, huh?"

"Stop jumping, kid, you're gonna wake the downstairs neighbors and they'll hate me even more than they already do." When he stops – and starts tapping his fingers on the counter instead – she replies, "Yeah, she is. We should probably try to come up with some way to repay her."

"Okay, what does she like?"

Emma racks her brain while pouring eggs onto the pan, still on early morning autopilot. "She likes coffee – black coffee – and onion rings. Not together, though, probably. And, um...running. And apparently, horses."

"Maybe keep working on that," Henry suggests. "Anything else you want to tell me? About Regina?"

"She doesn't like letting other people drive her car?"

Henry rolls his eyes. "That's not what I meant."

"She only likes the apple cider donuts they sell at this one place in Storybrooke – hey, maybe we can stop there and try them!"

"Mom, stop thinking about food!" Henry exclaims.

"But it's breakfast time!" She scoops the eggs onto a plate and passes it to him, swiping a bite before he can inhale the whole thing. "Eat up, you'll need your strength for managing the savage beasts."

"I don't think I'll be riding a *savage* horse," he says reasonably, with his mouth full of eggs. "She's pretty."

"She's too old for you, kid," Emma says with a laugh.

Henry sighs heavily and shoves another forkful into his mouth. "Not like that."

"I know, just teasing. You want cocoa?"

"Yes, please."

"Manners. I like it," Emma comments, pulling the mix out of the cabinet. She sets a pot of water on the stove to boil and asks, "So, how are you doing on those thank-you gift ideas?"

"I'm thinking! You haven't really given me that much to go on."

Emma smiles apologetically at her son and throws up her hands. "I know; I'm sorry. Honestly, the woman's kind of a mystery to me. Like, I know her, but I feel like I don't know anything about her. It's weird," she admits.

"Maybe you'll learn something about her today," he suggests. *Always so wise for a boy of his age*, Emma thinks. He definitely didn't get that

from her. "Do you think my jeans will be okay for riding? I only have those and...these pajamas."

"I'm sure they'll be fine. Cowboys wear jeans."

"Why am I even asking you?" Henry sighs. "Can I have your phone?"

"What? Why?"

"So I can call Regina and ask her, since she'll actually know what she's talking about."

"No, you can't call Regina at five in the morning! I'm sure she would have told you if you needed to wear something special."

Henry glares at her and Emma can't help but smirk as she pours two mugs of cocoa. "I'll send her a text," she promises. "You want to be on whipped cream duty this morning?"

Emma Swan is very serious about her road-trip mixes. That was the first thing Regina had learned this morning when she'd arrived at her partner's apartment and found the younger woman and her son carrying a

mess of complicated wires designed to hook up an iPod to the car's radio. Regina tries to act appreciative, but truthfully, she barely hears any of it over the roaring in her ears.

She rolls down the windows and tries to breathe as she speeds north on I-95, periodically sneaking glances at her two passengers in the rearview mirror. Both Emma and Henry seem happy, relaxed. How nice for them. Regina's knuckles are white, and she feels like she might need to pull over and hyperventilate. For about the hundredth time, she thinks about stopping, but they're halfway to Storybrooke.

There's no turning back now.

"So is there anything we should know about your parents?" Emma asks casually. "I mean, like, certain expectations of manners, anything like that?"

"Not really, just...normal manners," she mutters. "Ignore my mother if she says anything off-putting. Also, my father's name is Henry, so he'll probably make a big deal out of yours," she adds, turning to the boy in the backseat.

"Cool!" he exclaims. "Should I call him Henry? Or Mr. Mills?"

"Mr. Martinez, actually," Regina corrects. "My mother kept her maiden name."

"And you got hers?" Emma raises one eyebrow. "Kind of progressive for...what, 1970?"

Regina shakes her head. "In practice, yes, but the reasoning behind it is far from it. She thought I wouldn't be successful in the corporate or political world if I had a Hispanic last name. Of course, to her dismay, I chose to enter neither of those professions, so it didn't matter."

"Wow. One small step for feminism, one giant leap backward for racism," Emma jokes.

"Something like that."

"And your dad was okay with that?" Henry pipes up from the backseat.

"He doesn't care," Regina explains. "At least, he's never seemed to. He's fairly laid back about most things."

"So, the exact opposite of you?"

Irritated, Regina turns to shoot her partner a sharp glare, but her anger fades when she sees the giant grin on Emma's face. "I'm sorry," the

blonde says, apologetically rubbing her shoulder. "You just seem really stressed about seeing your parents."

"Doesn't everyone feel that way about their parents?" Regina questions, staring hard at the road and trying to ignore the tingling sensation Emma's touch brings to her skin.

Emma shrugs. "I wouldn't know, but probably."

"Oh," Regina says softly. "Right. I..I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay," Emma interrupts, but Regina can't help but think that it's *not* okay. She's not exactly known for being sensitive – probably how her coworkers had come to nickname her 'The Evil Queen' – but the idea that she had caused Emma a painful moment shoots a sharp pang through her heart. Still, perhaps this is the wrong time to attempt to process it, with Emma's son in the car and Regina hardly in an emotional state fit to offer support.

"She's an orphan, like Harry Potter," Henry ever so helpfully informs her. "Well, not really, since her parents didn't get killed by an evil dark wizard. That we know of."

"Yeah, and I also never had to live in a cupboard, for which I am extremely grateful. Other than that, Harry Potter and I are basically the same person."

"And to think, I never knew I was partnered with a celebrity," Regina deadpans.

Emma smirks. "Life is full of surprises," she says teasingly. Her hand is still on Regina's shoulder, rubbing back and forth in a gentle motion that Emma probably doesn't even realize she's doing but that renders Regina barely able to focus on anything else. She takes a deep breath and keeps her eyes on the road. The feeling is not altogether unpleasant, she decides.

"Is that what you're reading, Henry?" she asks, in a voice that's much higher and squeakier than usual. "Harry Potter?"

"Nah, I've already read all of them a million times. Anyway, this is a notebook," he explains, holding it up so she can see. "My friend Grace and I are writing a book together. I'm editing her part this weekend."

"And what are our favorite tragically displaced fairytale characters up to these days?" Emma says with a chuckle. When she twists around to look at her son, her hand drops, and Regina sighs from a confusing mix of relief and disappointment.

"Top secret."

"Fine," Emma huffs. Suddenly, her face lights up with an idea. "Hey, you know, Storybrooke would be a great name for the town!"

Henry nods in approval. "That's actually a pretty good idea," he says. "I'll ask Grace. We don't have a name yet."

Regina chews at her lower lip and looks at the road signs. Forty-five more minutes, maybe. The dread in the pit of her stomach is growing and she can feel a wave of nausea coming on even though she hadn't eaten anything for breakfast.

"Henry's writing a book," Emma is saying, "about a bunch of fairytale characters who get cursed to live in the real world with no memory of their former lives."

"All their happy endings get ripped away," Henry explains, "and they have to break the curse so they can get them back, but none of them actually know, so it's tricky."

"That sounds...interesting."

"And I was thinking Storybrooke would be a great name for the cursed town, because, you know, *Story*-brooke. Get it?" The blonde laughs to herself, and Regina tries to smile, but it comes out as a grimace.

"Yeah, Mom, we get it," Henry groans.

"Storybrooke is definitely a curse," Regina says under her breath. They pass a sign for a rest stop, and she abruptly pulls off the highway and mumbles something, she's not sure what, before putting the car into park and sprinting into the restroom without even turning it off. Emma can take care of it. She dry heaves over the toilet for a few minutes and then leans helplessly against the wall, shaking and trying to keep the tears building up behind her eyes from falling.

Deep breaths – in, out. It's not working. She digs her fingernails into her arm and starts counting by sevens. She's at 161 when she hears a knock at the door.

"Hey, Regina." It's Emma's voice. Damn it. "You okay?"

"Fine," she manages to grit out.

"You sure?"

No.

"Yes. I'm...I'll be out in a minute." She turns on the sink to make it sound like she's washing her hands and splashes a little of the cool water on her face.

She can do this. She wills her lower lip to stop quivering and takes one final big, shuddering breath before opening the door and saying brightly, "Well, shall we?"

Emma gives her a suspicious once-over. "You sure you're not getting sick?" she asks.

She's being given an out – she takes it. "Must have been something I ate," she lies, not particularly smoothly.

"Yeah, right. When's the last time you ate?"

Regina glares up at her partner – curse her and her instincts – and reluctantly admits, "It may be a case of overbearing mother-itis." Of course, that's not all of it, but she certainly can't share the rest, not with Emma. It's not fair to burden her with that knowledge.

"Regina," Emma sighs. "Look, this is a really nice thing you're doing for Henry, and I don't want to come off as ungrateful or anything, but if she makes you this stressed out, maybe you shouldn't have offered."

"I can handle my mother," Regina says robotically. "I've been handling her for forty-three years."

"That doesn't always make it easier."

I know! Regina wants to shout. This sympathy is not helping – it's only serving to bring her closer to tears. She doesn't need to be coddled, she needs-

"Do you need a hug?" Emma offers.

What is it with the Swan family and hugging her? Regina wonders, torn between curiosity and annoyance. "No," she says in a strained whisper. "I need...I need to get in the car and keep driving."

Emma nods slowly. "Okay," she agrees. "Want me to buy you a ginger ale or something? To help settle your stomach?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine." Regina straightens her shoulders and begins walking back towards the car, where Henry is awaiting them with a curious expression.

She manages to flash him a small smile as she gets back into the car. "Sorry for the brief interruption. Next stop, Storybrooke."

They take a break for donuts and coffee at a rundown-looking diner on Main Street that Emma has to admit is several cuts above anything she's had before. The donuts are, anyway. The coffee leaves something to be desired, but she drinks it anyway. Caffeine is caffeine. Henry likes the cocoa, and they even put cinnamon on it for him.

She stops to inhale the sea breeze – Storybrooke is apparently a coastal town – while Regina stops to speak to about the tenth person who's greeted her so far.

"You're kind of famous here, aren't you?" she observes.

Regina lets out a small, nervous laugh. "It's a small town, and my father is the mayor."

"Damn," Emma whistles. "Your parents are quite the power couple."

"I suppose," Regina says uneasily. "Although, there's not a lot of power in small town politics."

The drive from the center of town to the Mills-Martinez estate is fairly short, and Emma spends most of it looking out the window at the sleepy, picturesque little town surrounding them. It looks like nothing has changed since the early eighties. She tries to picture her incredibly regal and uptight partner running around here as a little girl and finds that she can't.

They pull up in front of a huge house – maybe not the biggest Emma's ever seen, but pretty damn close – and Regina shakily exhales as she turns off the car.

"Here we are," she says tersely. "I apologize in advance for whatever is about to happen."

Emma shoots Henry a stern look as a reminder to be on his best behavior, and thankfully, the kid seems to get it. He quickly straightens his shoulders and wipes the crumbs off his pants. They're met at the door by an older woman who must be *the* Cora Mills, judging by her appearance and the way Regina's shoulders immediately tense upon seeing her.

"Regina, darling, I wasn't expecting you'd actually make it." The woman's voice is happy and friendly, but not particularly warm.

"Hello, Mother," Regina says quietly. Her mother pulls her in close and they exchange stiff kisses on both cheeks, European style. "This is my colleague, Detective Emma Swan, and her son, Henry.

"How lovely to meet you both," Cora says, politely extending her hand. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" she questions her daughter.

"Henry would like to learn how to ride, so I offered to teach him."

Cora purses her lips. "How nice," she says with a fake smile. "I'll let you get out to the stables, then, before the day gets too hot. Will you and your friends be staying for dinner?"

Regina quickly shakes her head. "Probably not. It's a long drive back; they have plans tomorrow." They don't, but Emma just shrugs and nods.

"I see. Perhaps a late lunch, then?"

"That sounds lovely. Thank you, Mother." Regina casts a furtive glance toward the staircase. "Is Daddy home?"

"He's at a council meeting, but he should be home within thirty minutes. I'll send him out to say hello."

Regina nods and motions for Emma and Henry to follow her out into the back yard. Once Cora is out of sight and earshot, Emma watches, concerned, as her partner lets out a huge sigh of relief, rigid posture deflating as she practically sags against a tree. While there hadn't been anything particularly wrong with that encounter, seven years on the force (and eighteen in the foster system) have exposed her to her fair share of people who react to their parents in such a way, even well into adulthood, and there's part of her that wants to say something, but Henry is here and Regina has since straightened and resumed walking resolutely forward to a building about a hundred yards away, armor securely in place.

"Council meetings on Saturday morning?" Emma asks, hurrying to catch up.

Regina smirks in a way that never quite reaches her eyes. "More like brunch with a couple of friends, using his expense account. I'm sure town issues will be discussed for about five minutes."

"Geez, maybe I'll get into small town politics after I retire from this whole policing thing. Seems like a pretty nice life."

"It certainly affords a lot more relaxation," Regina agrees. "Here we are."

She pulls open the door of a large, wooden stable and holds it while Emma and Henry walk in: the latter eagerly, the former much less so. Emma hangs behind Regina, who deeply breathes in the musty smell of hay and manure like it's her favorite in the whole world. Emma is on edge, waiting for one of them to charge. A black horse in the first stall whinnies as they approach, and she jumps about a foot in the air.

"You really are afraid of horses, aren't you?" her partner marvels. "I thought Henry was exaggerating."

"He does tend to do that," Emma says through gritted teeth, "but not this time."

Regina looks shocked. "But horses are so-"

"Big!"

"It's pretty much her only fear," Henry adds informatively. He's already gone right up to that giant monstrosity of a beast and is happily petting it on the nose. "She's not afraid of any normal things – she'll probably go sky-diving before she rides a horse."

Emma mutters, "It's not my *only* fear," and Regina shoots her a sympathetic glance before reaching for her hand. She clasps it between both of hers and draws Emma in close.

"Are you okay to be in here?" Regina asks quietly. "You can wait outside if you want."

"Nah, I think it would probably be worse if Henry was inside and I couldn't see him," Emma whispers. "Besides," she tries to joke, "I'm feeling much better with you holding my hand like that."

Apparently her tone hadn't come across as humorously as she would have liked, because Regina regards her with big, serious eyes and says, "Okay," while squeezing her hand tighter. "Henry, our first task is to pick a horse for you to ride. We have five, and any of them would be a perfectly fine choice."

Almost immediately, Henry asks, "Can I ride this one? I think he likes me."

"Can't you shop around for a smaller one?" Emma protests feebly.

A small tremor passes through Regina's body and she swallows hard before saying, "Yes, of course. This is Bear. Don't worry," she tells Emma soothingly. "He's actually quite small for a horse, and he's extremely calm and gentle. Perfect for...for a first-time rider."

"Okay," Emma mumbles, casting her partner a confused look which the older woman carefully ignores.

"Now, some basic horse safety: when you feed him treats, keep your palm flat and your fingers close together, otherwise he'll confuse them for carrots and nip them. Also, we're going to learn how to brush and saddle him. When I let you into the stall, make sure you stand in front of him or on the side. Don't stand directly behind him."

"Why not?" Henry asks nervously.

"Horses kick back; it's their instinct. He won't mean to hurt *you*, obviously, but if he can't see you, he doesn't know if you're a friend or predator. But as long as he can see you, you'll be perfectly safe," she adds with a pointed glance at Emma.

"Okay," he agrees. He's got his game face on, but he's practically vibrating with the excitement he's trying to bury beneath the surface. *Regina had better let him at the horse before he explodes,* Emma thinks.

"I'm going to open the stall now," Regina says. "Just follow my lead. She drops Emma's hand so she can unbolt the door, and the blonde looks down sadly for a second at her newly cold fingers, missing the contact already.

Regina greets the horse like an old friend, petting his neck and leaning against him in a way that almost looks like a hug. For his part, Bear makes a friendly whuffling noise and nuzzles her shoulder. Emma would say it was adorable if the damn thing weren't quite so big.

"Was this the horse you competed on when you were younger?" Henry asks curiously.

"Oh, no," Regina says quickly. "Rocinante died years ago. He would be incredibly old by now. Bear, is...um...only eleven."

"Oh, cool. I'm almost eleven."

"You two have something in common, then," Emma chuckles. "I bet you'll be best friends." She thinks she sees the briefest flash of

something in Regina's eyes before the other woman quickly schools her features into a smile.

"Yes, I'm sure you will. Henry, why don't you grab some hay from over there to give him. Remember to keep your hand flat, like I told you. Like a plate."

Henry quickly obeys, offering the horse a handful of straw that Bear laps up eagerly, blowing air out of his nose in what sounds to Emma like a very happy growl. Henry giggles as the horse's tongue licks his hand. "That tickles," he exclaims.

Regina leans against Bear's neck with the most serene smile Emma has ever seen on her face and calls out, "Emma, would you like to feed him, too?"

"Uhhh...no thanks! I'll just watch."

Henry rolls his eyes at her. "Suit yourself," he mutters.

I will, she thinks, shrugging her shoulders. Actually, she's really enjoying watching this scene unfold. Henry is just so happy, and she's surprised at how relaxed Regina appears, especially with all her stress this morning at seeing her mother. The two of them are playing with the horse and brushing him and laughing together, and she just thinks that it looks so incredibly *right*. Like this was destined to happen, like it's fate.

Then she laughs and shakes her head because clearly she's been listening to too many of Henry's fairytales and not sleeping nearly enough.

"Good morning," says a deep, pleasant voice, and Emma looks up, startled, at the newcomer. She'd been so absorbed watching her partner and her son that she didn't hear his footsteps approach. He's an older man, pretty short, with white hair, and he has a warm smile that immediately puts her at ease.

"Daddy! Good morning!" Regina says happily, and Emma wonders if this is the same woman she sees at work every day and spent the morning with, because she couldn't possibly seem more different. She greets her father in the exact opposite way she did her mother and immediately melts into his arms.

"I'm so happy to see you, sweetheart," he murmurs, holding her tightly to his chest and stroking her hair. Regina buries her face in his shoulder for a moment before he asks, "And who are these important-looking people?"

"This is my partner, Emma, and her son, Henry," Regina explains. "They came to meet the horses. Well, Henry came to meet the horses, anyway. Emma, Henry, this is my father, Henry Martinez."

"Henry? What an excellent name, young man!" the older Henry exclaims, immediately pumping the younger Henry's hand. "You're in

extremely capable hands: my Regina is a great teacher."

"We're about to start getting Bear saddled," says Regina. "If you'd like to join us."

Henry fixes his daughter with a quizzical look. "Bear, really?" She gives him the smallest of nods and he shrugs. "Should I help prepare a horse for Emma to ride?"

"Oh, no!" Emma says quickly. "Emma doesn't ride. Emma is just here to watch and make sure Henry doesn't get hurt."

"And talk about herself in the third person," Henry snarks.

"Hey, watch it, kid, or I'll take you home right now."

"No, you won't," Henry counters. "Regina drove."

Regina and the older Henry laugh as Emma shoots her son a glare. "Maybe I'll keep you company while you watch, then," Regina's father suggests. The pair stand in the corner together while Regina shows Henry how to put on Bear's saddle and harness and then fastens a helmet on his head and helps him mount up (Emma has to close her eyes for that part) before leading the horse out by the reins.

"Not a big horse lover?" he asks Emma as they follow behind at a safe distance.

"Not really, no."

"Bad experience as a child?"

"Not exactly – wasn't around horses enough to have experiences one way or the other. I just never had enough interest to outweigh the fact that the thing is big enough to crush my skull if it wanted to."

She half expects that he's going to give her a lecture about how horses are such wonderful creatures and she just has to get to know them better, but he surprises her. "Well, that's very brave of you, then, to let your child learn to ride."

Emma shifts her weight uncomfortably and mumbles, "Well, it makes him happy, and, you know, I trust Regina. I feel like she wouldn't let him get hurt. And anyway, I mean...I guess one of the things I'm learning these days is that loving my kid means letting him live his life, not keeping him in a bubble. No matter how much it sucks for me," she adds with a grimace.

Henry nods approvingly, a faraway look in his eyes. "I worry about her every day," he admits. "On the job...she already almost died once."

Right, the White case, Emma thinks. She sometimes forgets about that, these days – it's different now that she knows Regina, the person, rather than Detective Mills, the legend. Henry is still murmuring, "It's the worst feeling in the world, knowing there's something out there you can't protect your child from. Even when they're all grown up...but don't you worry," he suddenly says, snapping out of his reverie. "Young Henry will be perfectly safe. I know my daughter will see to that."

"Yeah, like I said, I trust her," Emma replies. "Just one question, though: you seemed really surprised about Henry riding Bear. She wasn't lying about his calm temperament, was she? He's not some psycho horse who's going to throw my kid?"

"No, no, not at all," the older man quickly reassures her. "Bear is quite calm and incredibly sweet. I trained him myself – got him when he was just a foal. It's just...well, it's not really my place to say." He turns away from her, looking slightly troubled, and watches Regina show the younger Henry how to position his legs to make the horse walk in different directions.

"Okay, you don't have to, then." Regina corrects Henry's posture for about the third time, and the boy groans. Emma stares sheepishly at her feet – she feels like that's something mothers are supposed to be stricter about, but she's never bothered.

"Mom! Stop watching!" Henry suddenly yells. "You're stressing the horse out."

"He means you're stressing *him* out," the older Henry chuckles. "Has my daughter given you the grand tour of the grounds, yet?"

"Um...no. We-"

"Then let me. We'll give these two their space so we don't embarrass them too much." He takes in her uneasy expression and adds, "They will be perfectly safe. I promise."

Emma shrugs her assent and lets the mayor of Storybrooke lead her away by the elbow. She's still not entirely comfortable with the horse, but she supposes she can give them some space if that's going to make the experience more memorable for him. "Okay, you want to tell me something about Storybrooke?" she asks. "What goes on in this place that needs mayor-ing?"

"Well, our population is about fifteen thousand," he begins. "It was originally founded as a gemstone mining town, but that's been closed down for years. Our major industry nowadays is shipping..."

Regina watches her father and Emma disappear around the side of the stable, absentmindedly pulling the chain around her neck out from under her shirt and running her thumb back and forth along her engagement ring. She really hadn't expected Emma to leave - she had seemed so reluctant to let Henry out of her sight for even a minute - but perhaps

having a bit of separation from the thing that's making her so anxious is better for her overall mental health.

She wishes she could do the same.

Actually, no, she doesn't. She's strangely happy to be here with Henry. Intermittent heart palpitations aside, this is the most fun she's had in...well, in a while, anyway.

She has Henry lead Bear around in a circle, periodically switching directions, first at a walk, then she teaches him how to bring the horse up to trotting pace. She wouldn't go so far as to say he's a natural, but he's eager to learn and seems to have developed a decent bond with the horse rather quickly.

Then again, her father had specifically selected and trained Bear to be around children learning to ride for the first time.

When she thinks he's comfortable enough with his handling skills, she suggests taking a longer ride around the perimeter of the property. Henry looks longingly at the ring of fences next to them and asks, "Can't I learn to jump?"

Regina laughs. "Not today. I don't think you're quite ready yet; not to mention, your mother would probably kill me."

"Nah, she wouldn't kill you," he disagrees. "She likes you." And there's that damned tingling again. But he grudgingly agrees to her plan.

"Should we stop by the barn and get another horse for you to ride?"

Regina shakes her head. "No, I'll just walk or jog alongside in case I need to help you out."

"I can keep the horse under control," Henry protests. "I don't need any help."

"Of course you can. It's just...I didn't have time for my morning run today," she lies. "I need the exercise." Actually, she had gone close to twenty miles and her legs currently feel like jelly, but she doesn't think it would greatly inspire his confidence if she admitted she hasn't been on a horse for close to eleven years now.

He's a great conversationalist, Regina discovers as they make their way through the orchard, and shockingly intelligent and mature for his age. She thinks it must be the writer in him, always thinking deeply about connections and trying to make sense of other people's experiences.

"So, what was it like to grow up in Storybrooke?" he asks. "It's really small."

"It was fine," she says smoothly. "It's a nice place to be child, anyway. I always had my horses and a lot of space to play outside and explore. But, you're right. It's very small."

"I've always lived in cities," Henry says, "first Boston and now New York, but I think it would be fun to live in a small town. It seems like everyone knows each other."

"Yes, well, that can be both a blessing and a curse. Although, I suppose not knowing anyone can be the same."

"New York just has so many people, it's hard to get to know anyone. I mean, I have friends at school, but sometimes you can just get lost in the crowd. It can get a little...I don't know..."

"Lonely?" Regina guesses.

Henry sighs. "Yeah, lonely."

"Small towns can get lonely, too," Regina points out. "Knowing everyone doesn't necessarily mean you like them, and if you don't, you can't get away from them very easily."

"I guess," he agrees. "And, anyway, I doubt my parents would ever want to live in a place like this, especially my mom. Being a cop here would

probably be really boring. Do they even have a police department?"

"They do, actually. It consists of one sheriff. My father tried to convince me to take the job a few years ago, but I declined. As you said, it would be horribly boring. A lot of sitting around and eating donuts and rescuing the occasional cat from a tree."

"I bet that would be lonely, too," Henry guesses. "I mean, working by yourself all day."

"You're probably right, although it's probably better in some ways than working with coworkers whom you dislike."

"Do you have a lot of those?" he asks with a smirk.

"No, of course not," Regina lies awkwardly, and Henry's grin deepens. "Not...not your mother anyway. I just think that sometimes...sometimes it's not just the amount of social interaction in our lives that determines whether we're lonely or not. Sometimes even one person can be enough. It's...it's when you don't have someone...you don't have anyone - I think that's when it starts to get you."

She looks down at her feet, hoping he'll take what she just said as a general statement of wisdom rather than a depressing analysis of her own life. She's not sure what it is about this boy that had made her open herself up to him like that, but she realizes right away that she shouldn't

have. He's ten; he shouldn't have to know about things like loss and loneliness.

The fact that many ten year olds know plenty about it is one that she's intimately familiar with, but one she'd really prefer not to acknowledge.

Henry rides in silence for a moment, looking contemplative. Finally he says, "Hey, Regina?"

"Yes?"

"I'm really glad my mom has you. I think she was really lonely before, especially after I moved, but now she's not. I'm glad you're her someone."

Is she laughing or choking? She's not sure. "Oh, Henry, I don't know about that. But, if she's feeling less lonely, then...I'm glad, too."

They're out at the edge of the orchard, now, and Regina checks her watch. It's getting awfully close to the time her mother typically likes to eat lunch, and they're going to have to hurry if she wants to teach him how to groom the horse before she turns into a mess of Cora Mills-induced anxiety.

"Are you ready to try a little faster speed?" she asks.

"Definitely!" Henry says enthusiastically. "But what about you? Can you run as fast as a horse?"

No, she can't, but is there really another option. She feels her chest start to tighten at the thought of-

"Do you want to ride with me? That's...that won't hurt him, right? Carrying two people?"

"It...no, it won't. Not for such a short distance." Henry's tiny, and Bear could probably use the exercise. He certainly doesn't get ridden as often as he's supposed to. She considers for a split second before swinging herself up onto the saddle behind the boy and squeezing her eyes shut, counting to ten to steady her breathing. This isn't so bad; it may have been a while, and she's always preferred riding without a saddle, but this feels natural. She keeps one hand on the reins and wraps her other arm firmly around Henry's middle. "Okay, we're going to squeeze our legs together and give a little kick to get him to start. Lightly at first - you don't want to deal with a charging horse if he gets too excited," she coaches. "If this is too fast for you..."

"It won't be," Henry says confidently.

"Well, just let me know if you start to get nervous, and we'll slow down."

She urges Bear to pick up the pace. It's not his full speed, of course, but Henry doesn't have to know that. It's faster than she would have allowed him to ride on his own, at least, and definitely faster than Emma would probably like, but for the first time all day, she feels like she's got everything under control. She hears the gleeful giggle that escapes from Henry over the pounding of the horse's hooves, and she feels her own face break out into a grin as her hair blows back in the wind. She's missed this.

How the hell has she gone ten years without allowing herself to feel this kind of joy?

They're back at the stable far too soon - Regina forces Henry to gradually slow Bear to a walk before they get anywhere his mother could possibly see them. "We don't want to give her a heart attack," she explains.

"Yeah, that would kind of ruin all the fun," Henry reluctantly agrees. He turns up to her and flashes her a smile so sweet it almost makes her cry. "This will just be our little secret, then?"

"Right: our secret." She shouldn't be having any secrets with her partner's son, probably, but this one feels more fun than harmful. And he's beaming and leaning back so comfortably against her, and she doesn't even remember the last time she felt this light and happy.

In front of the stable, she helps him dismount and secures Bear to a fence post before procuring a bucket, some sponges, and a brush. Henry

happily skips beside her, linking their arms at the elbows.

"You two have a good ride?" Emma asks. She's still hanging far back from the horse, but she looks much less apprehensive than before. Beside the blonde, Regina's father is staring at her with a mix of shock and pride that makes her extremely uncomfortable. She nods, eyes averted, while Henry starts bouncing toward his mom and raves about how much fun he had.

The elder Henry follows Regina around back to the hose where she's starting to fill the bucket with water. "You rode with him," he observes.

"Yes, well, the horse was faster than me, and I didn't think Emma would have appreciated my allowing him to ride off on his own," Regina mutters. Her father ignores her.

"You've refused to get on a horse for over ten years. What made today different?"

"I don't know, Daddy, okay? Will you just drop it?" Regina snaps.

"Darling, I know you don't like to talk about it, but this is a really huge step, and I just wanted to acknowledge that. I'm so proud of you, Regina."

"Thank you," she says stiffly, trying her best to sound appreciative. She is, truly; her father has been nothing but supportive through this entire ongoing ordeal. He's read every book, gone to her therapy, held her through the hard moments and celebrated her progress. The problem, of course, is that he'll be so proud he'll tell her mother, and Mother does not celebrate progress. Mother only pushes for more and doesn't understand why that seems to backfire, *every single time*.

"Would you like to help with grooming?" she offers.

"I'd be honored." He helps her pick up the now-full bucket - *he's really getting too old to be doing heavy lifting like that*, Regina thinks uneasily - and follows her back to Emma and Henry, shining eyes never leaving her face for a second.

"Our tourism rates have been down over the past few years, probably due to the economy, but Storybrooke has some unique attractions," her father is explaining. "It's a real hidden gem." He laughs at his own little quip. "Because it used to have a gemstone mine." Emma and Henry both force laughs while Regina and Cora roll their eyes affectionately.

"We moved here when Regina was a baby, and it hasn't changed much since then," Cora adds with a slight grimace. "But Henry believes in setting down roots."

Overall, Regina muses as she takes a bite of her salad, this luncheon could be far worse. It's a little awkward, a little stilted, but mostly quite pleasant. Her father seems thrilled to brag about his town, and her mother has been largely silent except for the few times she's needed to explain to the younger Henry (and most likely his mother, too – not that she'd ever admit it) what exactly is on his plate. Perhaps she should bring people every time she visits.

Emma and Henry, for their part, seem to be getting along reasonably well with Regina's parents. Emma is listening intently – or at least pretending – to the history lecture about Storybrooke's mining days, and Henry's dreamy smile hasn't left his face since they returned from the stable. He's probably thinking about horses, Regina assumes. She knows that smile well – she spent much of her childhood wearing one just like it.

"Henry!" Cora says abruptly.

Both Henrys look up at once, and Emma chuckles.

"I meant...Little Henry, dear," Cora tells her husband.

"Does that make me Big Henry, then?"

"I'm not little!" Little Henry protests.

Big Henry feigns offense and adds, "And I may be a bit out of shape, but I'd prefer not to be called 'big.'"

Cora rolls her eyes. "Anyway, I was going to ask how old you were."

"Ten...and a half," he adds, puffing his chest out to appear bigger.

"How nice. That puts you in...fourth grade? Fifth?"

"Fourth. I just missed the cut-off in Massachusetts," he grumbles. "I would have made it in New York, but I didn't live there when I started school."

"You live in New York?" Cora asks, one eyebrow raised. Out of the corner of her eye, Regina thinks she sees Emma's face fall. "I thought-"

"It's really not that complicated if you put your mind to it," Regina mutters under her breath, mentally willing her mother to stop talking. But then, Cora has never been great at reading anyone's thoughts, least of all her daughter's.

"Yeah, with my dad. My mom lives in Boston."

"Oh, so your parents aren't together, then?"

Regina wonders how hard she can squeeze her water glass before it shatters. Henry seems completely unfazed, though. "No, because it turns out my mom is gay." He suddenly flinches – Emma must have kicked him under the table. "What? It's nothing to be ashamed of! That's what you and Dad always say."

"Yes," Emma hisses, "but not being ashamed and sharing it with a bunch of people we don't even know are two different things!"

"Oh, yes, of course. That makes sense, then," Big Henry says quickly, seeming to realize they've steered into potentially uncomfortable territory. "How nice that you're so accepting and well-adjusted."

Little Henry shoots Emma an "I told you so" look and replies, "Yeah, I don't really care who my parents date as long as they're nice and give me the occasional bribe. Bonus points if they'll buy me a puppy."

"Smartass," mutters Emma.

"Regina, dear, maybe that's something you should try," Cora suggests, flashing her daughter a bright smile that looks vaguely wolfish.

I spoke too soon about today being okay, Regina thinks desperately. Whatever comes out of her mother's mouth next, it's almost guaranteed to *not* be okay. She wonders if she can just grab Emma and Henry and flee the room before it happens.

"Try what, Mother?" she asks apprehensively. "Being gay? Buying a puppy?"

"Dating someone who already has a child! It's the perfect way to get what you've always wanted without having to deal with any of the legal or financial hurdles that come with adoption. There's still time to try again."

Big Henry inhales sharply. "Cora, this is-"

"Or perhaps just dating in general. Men, women, those progressive people who make their own pronouns – I don't care. You need to stop wallowing and move on with your life. It's been ten years since Daniel-"

Regina doesn't hear what comes next; she *can't* hear what comes next. Her ears are ringing and her eyes are swimming and all she can see is a vague red haze as she abruptly stands and bolts. She thinks she hears a crash behind her as her chair hits the floor, but she doesn't turn back, taking the stairs two at a time until she's finally up in the safety of her childhood room. She manages to wait until the door has slammed shut before she collapses to the floor and lets the tears fall.

What the hell was that? Emma wonders, sharing a confused look with Henry as Regina's parents begin arguing back and forth over their heads. She reviews the last five minutes in her head; they had just been having a normal conversation, hadn't they? Until, suddenly, they weren't.

"Cora, you know not to push her like that," Henry says with a tired groan.

Cora shrugs defensively. "You said she got on a horse today. I thought that since she's doing so well, she might be a bit more open to the idea."

"Riding a horse isn't synonymous with dating again. Remember what the doctor said about letting her control her own progress."

"It has been ten years!" Cora protests. "It's time for her to move on."

"It's not that simple! She'll move on when she's ready."

"And when will that be? On her death bed? She's forty-three years old, Henry! She's not your baby anymore, and you need to stop treating her like one, or she'll never learn to face reality."

"She'll always be my baby, and she's already faced more reality than anyone should ever have to."

Emma clears her throat. This conversation is starting to go down a path that might be inappropriate for a ten year old. "Henry, why don't you go read in the living room or something," she suggests. "I'll...um...find Regina?"

Cora and the older Henry turn to her, startled, like they've just remembered that they have guests.

"Of course, good idea," Cora says smoothly, quickly standing and adjusting her blouse. "She's probably in the room right at the top of the stairs."

"Young man," the older Henry says, "did I hear you like puppies?" Little Henry nods. "Our neighbor's dog just had a litter. Would you like to go see them?"

"Mom, can I?" he asks eagerly.

"Sure, of course. I'll just...just yell when you're back and we'll figure out our plan for the rest of the day?"

Emma sighs as the Henrys walk out the door – Cora in tow – and wishes she could follow. But Regina had gone after her when she'd run out of the room crying; now it's time for her to return the favor.

She finds Regina's room exactly where Cora had said it would be. The door is shut, and she takes a deep breath before knocking, concerned about what she'll find on the other side. Will her partner be an inconsolable mess? In full-on Evil Queen mode?

She supposes she'll soon find out.

"It's not locked," comes from inside the room, so quietly she almost doesn't hear it. She slowly pushes the door open and looks around. She hasn't had a whole lot of time to spend picturing Regina Mills's childhood bedroom, but there's basically nothing in here that surprises her. Actually, there's basically nothing in here. Just a bed and a lot of boxes, floral wallpaper that screams "eighties" and "picked out by mother." What little decoration remains mostly consists of pictures of horses and one blue Wellesley pennant. Regina is sitting on her bed, back against the wall and knees hugged tightly to her chest. She's sniffling and her cheeks are stained with tears, Emma observes, but she's not actively crying.

"Hey," Emma says softly.

"Hey." Regina's reply is rough, voice strained from holding back tears.

"So, your mother is...um...well, she's a piece of work," Emma stammers.

"Yes, I'm aware." Regina takes one, two, then three slow, deep breaths in and out. "I'm sorry if she made you uncomfortable."

"I'm...yeah, no. I'm totally fine. I was more concerned about you."

"I'm fine," Regina says through gritted teeth. "I was simply caught off-guard. My reaction was weak and childish. There's no need to worry. I'll be downstairs in just a moment."

"It can be a sensitive topic," Emma says reassuringly. Regina gives her a quizzical look, clearly confused. "I mean, having kids or whatever. Infertility, stuff like that. It's a totally normal reaction." From the expression on her partner's face, she assumes she got something completely wrong.

Regina toys with the ring hanging around her neck and sighs. "I wasn't *infertile*," she mutters. Then, more loudly, "I need some air."

Emma watches, baffled, as Regina forces open one of the windows and starts to climb out. "You can join me, if you like," she offers woodenly. "There's a nice view. Unless...Henry..."

"Gone to see the neighbor's new puppies with your parents, probably having a grand old time. Unless...do you want to be alone?"

Regina thinks for a moment before biting her lower lip and shaking her head. "No, I...I don't want to be alone," she says in a barely audible whisper.

"Okay." Emma follows her partner out onto a flat part of the roof and whistles as she looks over the Mills estate in its entirety. Regina hadn't been kidding about the incredible view. She sees Henry walking down the driveway with Cora and Big Henry, bouncing excitedly and probably going on and on about puppies.

Emma wordlessly watches as the other woman sits down and starts worrying one of the roofing tiles with her fingertips, wondering what exactly her role in all of this is supposed to be. After a few awkward moments, Regina finally breaks the silence.

"Sit," she commands.

Emma sits.

Another full minute passes before Regina says, "The presentation that they give at the Academy...the White case...it isn't true."

Emma wrinkles her nose, now completely befuddled. Aside from being surprising, that was not at all what she had been expecting to hear about. "It's not?"

"It is, but it's not...it's not the whole truth."

Now intrigued, Emma sits stock still and waits for her partner to continue.

"About twelve...no, maybe almost thirteen years ago, I was asked to start investigating a cold case: the disappearance of a woman – Belle French," Regina says slowly, pausing frequently as though she can't talk and breathe at the same time. "Leopold White" – she cringes as she utters his name – "was a suspect in her disappearance, along with the murders of several other women, but we didn't have enough evidence to charge him. It was all circumstantial, inadmissible..."

So far, this is all fairly familiar to Emma, but it feels different, coming from the source.

"I was undercover, posing as...well, eventually, as his girlfriend," she explains with great disgust.

"But then he found out you were a cop, and you got pulled off the case," Emma recalls.

Regina shakes her head. "No," she croaks. "That isn't...well, yes, eventually he did discover that. But that's not...the reason I was pulled from the case was...was that I..." She squeezes her eyes shut and digs her fingernails into the palm of her hand so hard that Emma's afraid she's going to draw blood. "I was pregnant," she finally bursts out.

Emma feels her jaw drop and her eyes bulge so hard they feel like they're about to pop out of her skull. That was certainly *not* mentioned in the presentation.

Holy shit. She was – was it...? Well, it's not like that matters now. Whatever happened – whatever reason she doesn't have a child here right now – Emma can guess and, oh, it makes her sick – she's clearly devastated.

"I...I asked them not to...it was private." Regina clears her throat. "The rest," she continues in a monotone, "is as I assume you learned it. White discovered my identity, tracked me down, and attacked me in my home." Her voice is completely hollow, but her eyes betray layers of hurt. "I was able to subdue him after a struggle, but my fiancé didn't...didn't survive his injuries," – she lets out a tiny, heartbreaking sob - "and my unborn child didn't survive mine."

"Oh." Emma's lips part as her jaw hangs slack, exhaling the syllable in an abrupt, painful puff of air.

Regina nods and turns away. "Anyway," she finishes after taking a moment to recompose herself, staring off into the distance while her

fingers rip the tile pretty much to shreds, "I should, in theory, have a son about Henry's age, and my mother enjoys bringing that up from time to time to remind me of my weaknesses and failures."

"How are the actions of a deranged serial killer *your* failures?" Emma demands.

"Her issue is more with the fact that I haven't yet 'moved on,'" Regina explains, a hard edge of bitterness and anger in her voice that Emma hasn't heard before, even in her sharpest remarks to Locksley or Blanchard. "A new lover, a new child – just forget everything and make a new life." She laughs harshly. "As if it's that simple."

"I'm sorry," Emma murmurs, overwhelmed by sadness and anger. She feels tears of her own stinging her eyes and has strain to keep them in.

"I do not require your pity. My weakness is mine, and mine alone to handle. And I'll thank you not to share this information with Jones or Nolan or any of your other little friends," she adds with an icy glare. "Locksley and ADA Blanchard already know, but I'd prefer you not discuss it with them, either."

Why the hell does Blanchard know? Emma wonders. Locksley, she remembers, had worked on the case, but...

She quickly abandons the thought. It's unimportant. "Of course not," she immediately promises. "I would never." She scoots a little closer to

Regina and rests her hand on top of the one that's now picking the tile clean off the roof. "Thank you," she says quietly, "for trusting me."

Regina turns back around then, angry mask gone and her shining eyes staring deeply into Emma's. "Thank you for listening," she husks.

"Any time, partner." Emma offers a reassuring smile and takes the chance of putting an arm around Regina's shoulders. The brunette tenses slightly, but she doesn't fight it.

"My mother..." Regina mutters, "maybe she's right. It's been ten years, but I'm still...I can't..."

"There's no law that says you have to."

"I really have been...I've made progress. I have everything under control – they wouldn't have allowed me back on the force if I didn't, so you don't have to worry about that. But my parents..."

"Sometimes people bring out parts of us that we'd rather just forget about," Emma says sympathetically. "I turn into an angry teenager again whenever I'm around Henry's dad for too long."

That earns a short bark of laughter before Regina immediately straightens her shoulders and schools her features into a serious

expression. "I don't want you to think I'm not capable of watching your back on the job," she informs Emma. "I'm not...I'm not broken. I'm not a victim. This doesn't affect my work."

"Of course not," Emma immediately exclaims. "I trust you."

"Are you sure? If...if you want a new partner after this, I'd...I'd understand."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Emma shakes her head in disbelief. "Working with you has been my dream since I first decided to become a cop! If you think this changes anything, well, it doesn't. I have so much respect for you and this...if anything, it makes me admire you more." Her partner rolls her eyes at the final comment, but Emma continues staring her down, unflinching, willing her to believe.

"So, we're good?" Regina asks guardedly.

"We're good," Emma confirms. "As long as your mother doesn't show up at any crime scenes, I guess," she adds.

Regina's lips curl into the tiniest of smirks. "We should probably get back downstairs. I'll apologize for my outburst, and then, I guess...we'll start the drive home. Unless Henry wants to spend more time with the horses."

Emma shrugs. "Totally up to you. It's your house, your car. We'll just follow your lead."

Almost as if on cue, Little Henry's voice comes up the stairs, "Mom! Regina! We're back from seeing the puppies!"

Regina quickly rises, dusting a bit of dirt off her pants before climbing back in through the window. "We're on our way!" she calls. Emma groans and pushes herself to her feet as Henry's words from this morning come back to her. *Maybe you'll learn something about her today.* Well, he was certainly right about that, but what she's just learned doesn't really help much with gift ideas.

One more brief trip to the stables, awkward goodbyes with Big Henry and Cora, and they're in the car on their way back to Boston. The trip is largely silent. Henry is scribbling away in his notebook about something he refuses to share – probably notes for the knight-on-horseback scenes of his fairytale. He takes detail very seriously.

Emma spends much of the drive stealing glances at Regina out of the corner of her eye, and Regina, for her part, carefully avoids her partner's gaze. Emma hadn't been lying on the rooftop – she still trusts Regina over anyone else – but she'd be lying if she said that what she'd just learned hadn't made her view the other woman a little differently. Not necessarily in a bad way, just...differently.

She remembers her instructors at the Academy briefly mentioning an officer who had been killed by White during the investigation – she wonders if that was Regina's fiancé. She can't recall what his name was; they were always very vague about his involvement in the case. She supposes that they were trying to protect Regina's privacy, which was decent of them, perhaps. It's the least they can do, after their complete and utter failure to protect her safety.

Regina interrupts her progressively angrier and angrier thoughts with a quiet remark, "I think Henry's sleeping."

Emma turns to the backseat to see her son completely passed out, notebook forgotten on his lap and mouth wide open as he lets out a cute little snore.

"I'll pay to clean your car if he drools on the seats," she promises.

"That won't be necessary." Regina adjusts the rearview mirror and watches him sleep for a minute. "I guess the riding tired him out."

"Yeah, he was way too excited to sleep last night, too," Emma says with a grin. "I'm guessing he'll be out until we get home, and then he'll wake up and demand massive quantities of food."

"I'm guessing our unfinished lunch wasn't quite the typical fare of a prepubescent boy?" Regina suggests, smiling wryly.

"Nah, he liked it. Kid's just a bottomless pit. I keep thinking he's eventually going to start a growth spurt, or, like, become obese, but he eats everything in sight and stays the same size. His dad actually got him tested for a tapeworm, but he's parasite free – just an absurdly fast metabolism."

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the weekend?" Regina asks.

"Not sure. I've gotta talk to his dad about when he wants to head back to New York. I don't know how much help his foster sister needs or what exactly is going on."

"I see. Is that...do people typically maintain close bonds with former foster siblings?"

Emma shakes her head. "Depends on the person and the circumstances, I guess. I haven't really stayed in touch with any of mine. Neal and Wendy lived together for a long time, though, with a pretty good family, so they had more of a chance to get close."

"Oh."

"Anyway," Emma adds quickly, "Neal's a lot better than I am at maintaining social bonds and stuff like that. I'm basically a loner."

"I have trouble believing that. You have – you get along well with everyone. Jones, ADA Blanchard..."

"Yeah, but I'm not particularly close to them," Emma disagrees. "I mean, besides Neal, who I kind of *had* to stay in contact with" – she jerks her head toward the sleeping boy in the backseat – "the person who knows the most about me is probably...you."

"Oh."

It's amazing, Emma thinks, how much Regina can say with just one word. Even with just a single syllable, her voice and expression convey shock, sadness...maybe she even seems touched by the sentiment.

The rest of the drive is completed without further conversation. Henry, as predicted, awakes as soon as the car stops in front of Emma's apartment, and declares that his stomach is growling.

Emma hands him the key, and he races upstairs to find some snacks. Meanwhile, Regina switches off the engine and comes out to stand next to Emma on the sidewalk.

"Thank you so much, Regina," she says sincerely. "For today, for everything. You pretty much made Henry's whole life. He probably won't talk about anything else for weeks."

"It was my pleasure," Regina insists. "Henry is wonderful, and...thank *you* for allowing me to get to know him." She gently grabs Emma's hand and adds, "I hope you both had a nice time, even though you had to be around horses, and...all of that."

"I did. I...yeah, I did." She'd like to say more, but there's nothing she can think of that will sound right. It's okay, though – Regina seems to understand.

Their faces drift closer, so close their noses are almost touching, and Regina's gaze flickers downward to Emma's lips. She can feel the brunette's warm breath on her face, and her cheeks flush as several cocoons full of butterflies hatch and take flight in her stomach.

Emma leans forward, and their lips nearly brush against each other just before Henry hollers, "Mom, how old is the hummus in the fridge?"

Regina's eyes widen, and she leaps backwards, as if she's just become aware of what was about to happen. "I...I...good night, Emma," she finally stutters. "I'll see you on Monday."

She jumps into her car and drives off before Emma can fully digest the situation enough to reply. *What the hell?* she thinks. Her fingers drift upwards to touch her lips, which feel like they're on fire, and she wonders if the wave of nausea that's slowly taking over her innards is due to horror that she almost kissed her partner or disappointment that she didn't.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> Thank you, amazingly lovely readers, for all of your love! I hope you savored the fluff, because...well, let's just say there might not be more where that came from for a while. Hopefully, you also enjoy a bit of angst and heartbreak.
>
> ***I don't want to spoil anything, but I do need to put a severe TRIGGER WARNING on the end of this chapter for violence, blood, and major injury (not death, I wouldn't do that to you).
>
> On that note, the next chapter might take a bit longer to write than usual, because there is a bunch of medical and psychological stuff I really want to get right. So, apologies all around. Please don't hate me?

It's a night of fitful sleep for Regina. An hour here, thirty minutes there. Her body is overcome with exhaustion and her mind fatigued, but her heart won't seem to go below one hundred beats per minute and the same thought keeps forcing its way into her consciousness in the form of a horrified accusation: she had almost kissed Emma Swan.

Well, actually, if she's remembering the moment correctly, it was Emma who had almost kissed *her* (which leads to a set of thoughts so confusing she refuses to even begin considering them in her present state), but Regina had wanted it.

Oh, how she had wanted it!

And *she* had set this in motion. She had allowed Emma Swan into her life, into her heart. She had opened the gates of the fortress wide open and had failed to remember that those walls were built for a reason, that there are fierce battles raging inside and someone, likely the person who deserves it the least, is bound to get hurt when they enter into the thick of it without proper armor of their own.

She can't allow that to happen. She can't allow any harm to come to that beautiful young woman with so much life and so much to offer the world that would all be wasted on someone who stopped living a long time ago. She can't allow it because, somewhere, buried deep beneath the thick walls of stone and iron, hidden away in a cold, dark cellar (or maybe a dungeon), there is love. There is love for Emma Swan shining like a dim golden beacon, a tiny flame that's growing stronger by the day, even by the second, threatening to explode into a roaring fire that will burn down everything in its path.

It needs to be put out before it's too late, because love is not a welcome emotion in Regina's life anymore. Love is pain; love is turmoil. It's weakness and it's agony and loss, and it's something that Emma hardly deserves to have to face and that Regina is not capable of facing for a second time. She needs to snuff it out immediately.

But she's not a strong person. She's not strong enough to overcome the flame, so the only thing left to do is cover it and run.

"Robin, I need a new partner!" she barks into the phone.

The voice at the other end is groggy, confused. "Regina," Locksley yawns, "it's six on Sunday morning."

"I know, and I'm sorry; I just need to change partners...effective immediately."

"And you couldn't have waited 'til eight? What the hell did Swan do?"

Regina blinks. "She didn't do anything," she explains quickly, almost angrily. "This...this is on me." She feels the tears welling up in her eyes and clamps her teeth down on her lower lip to keep from screaming in agony. How does she always manage to ruin everything?

"Okay," Locksley replies, drawing out the syllables as he muffles another yawn. "So, what did you do?"

"Do you have some sort of nosiness compulsion?" she demands. "What I did is none of your business!"

She can almost hear his scowl through the phone. "What the hell, Regina? If you want to change partners, as your commanding officer, I

need to know why. I know we agreed not to play that card anymore, but even so, as your friend, I think it became my business when you called me. I repeat: *you* called *me*. At six. On Sunday!" His voice has risen so that he's almost shouting by the end, and Regina hangs her head in shame.

"Robin, I'm so sorry," she says quietly, though her contrite tone comes out as more of a whimper than she'd been expecting as she struggles against the harsh sobs threatening to escape from her chest at any moment.

That stops him dead in his tracks. "Look, Regina, whatever happened, whatever you did, I'm sure it's not the end of the world." His tone is softer now, the rant he had been about to start completely forgotten. "Is anyone dead or seriously injured?"

"No," she sniffs.

"And is anyone in danger of becoming that way in the next twenty-four hours?"

"No."

"Okay," he says calmly, "then what I want you to do is take a day to cool off. Get some perspective on the situation: go for a run, a long drive, anything you need to do. And then, on Monday morning, if you still feel

that you need a new partner, come to my office, and we'll talk. Do you think you can handle that plan?"

Regina considers for a moment. "Yes, that sounds acceptable," she finally whispers.

"Good. Now, I'm going back to sleep, and I'd suggest that you do the same if I didn't already that know you won't." She tries to chuckle, but the sound gets caught in her throat and comes out more like a croak. "And, just so you know," Robin adds, "if you need anything at all, I'm here. I might complain, but I'll always pick up the phone. You do know that, right?"

"I do. I...thank you."

She's about to hang up when he suddenly says, "Oh, and Regina? Maybe...maybe you should try talking to Swan. Whatever happened...it's probably not quite as bad as you think it is."

"Maybe," she allows. "Sleep well, Robin."

She hangs up and flops back onto the couch, pressing a pillow over her mouth so her scream won't wake the neighbors. Robin may be right about a lot of things, but he's wrong about one: this is just as bad as she thinks it is. It might even be worse.

xx

"What are you writing, kid?" Emma asks curiously. Henry's barely touched his breakfast and has been furiously writing all morning, but not in his notebook. He's using nice paper and the fancy pen she'd bought him for his last birthday, and she thinks she even sees some illustrations in there.

Henry quickly covers the paper with his arm and says, "It's for Regina. I finally figured out what to give her for a thank-you gift."

"You're writing her a story? That's awesome; I bet she'll love it." Emma looks down at her own uneaten eggs and sighs. Much like her son, she's been thinking about Regina pretty much non-stop since last night, but unlike his thoughts, hers are mostly regretful. What the hell had she been thinking? Nothing, clearly, just feeling that there was a face close to hers, a gorgeous face, and that she had a sudden urge to kiss it.

Unfortunately, that face had belonged to the one person who is perhaps the most off-limits to her: her partner. Her partner with whom she has to work every day, who is supposed to share mutual respect with her and have her back at crime scene.

Partner. Mentor. Potential friend if she had played her cards right. Certainly not a lover.

There is absolutely no reason their lips should *ever* be touching, that's for sure. However she might feel towards her partner (she's no longer certain what exactly that is), she should never have let herself get into such a compromising, unprofessional situation. Hadn't she learned her lesson after that night at the bar?

Besides, Regina isn't into her. She's not even into women, or at least she's never given any indication that she might be. There was that one moment...well, anyway, she'd clearly misread the situation. That much is clear from the way Regina had fled.

Emma casts a quick glance at her phone before deciding against it. What is she supposed to say, anyway? *I'm sorry for bringing my mouth too close to your mouth; I promise it won't happen again?* No, anything she says will sound stupid. Most importantly, she can't take the chance of Henry overhearing. He already has some strange ideas about what she and Regina are to each other, and she can't shatter his illusion that she has her life together. Not yet – he's too young to understand.

Neal's driving back to New York at three: she'll wait to think about Regina until then. She can't waste her last six hours with her son for who-knows-how-long on pointless anxiety.

"So," she breaks the silence, "are you just gonna be writing all day, or do you want to get out and do something while you're in Boston?"

"I think I can finish Part One in an hour or so," Henry replies without looking up, intently drawing something that looks, from Emma's angle, a galloping horse. "Then I'll stop writing and hang out with you. Maybe we can go to the science museum and then take a walk to the North End to get some lunch?"

"I assume that includes a trip to Mike's?" Emma asks with a smirk. "Wait, hold up! This story has multiple installments?"

"Yeah, of course," Henry says with a shrug. "I'll probably have to give Regina another thank-you present sometime, and then I'll write more of the story. I mean, I hope it's not over yet. Don't you?"

"I..." Emma groans. His eyes are searching hers, so hopeful, so wise and all-knowing. "Yeah, kid, I do," she admits.

Henry grins. "Well, since you agree with me, I guess I can give you a little sneak peek," he says in a conspiratorial whisper. "It's the story of a kind and beautiful queen and a really awesome, brave prince from a different kingdom who are both lonely, but then they make friends and have adventures together."

"What kind of adventures?" Emma asks, raising one eyebrow.

"This is just the first one, but so far they've gone horseback riding and rescued a lost swan, and now it's their pet. "

Emma's not sure whether she wants to burst out laughing or crying. "That sounds perfect," she says with a strangled squeak.

"I hope Regina likes it, too." Henry looks down uncertainly at what he's written so far. "I hope she doesn't think it's lame or anything."

"No way, kid," Emma comforts him, quickly regaining her composure now that her son needs her to be in Reassuring Mommy Mode. "She'll love it. Did you know her nickname at work is the Evil Queen?"

"What?" Henry wrinkles his nose. "That's stupid. She's not evil."

"Right, so what I'm saying is that I think she'll like being the kind and beautiful queen instead, you know? I bet it will totally make her day."

Henry beams. "Good. Now stop distracting me so I can finish."

"You know you're the bossiest kid ever," Emma grumbles. "You so did not get that from me."

He just laughs.

xx

Regina enters the squad room the next morning – early, so she can meet with Locksley – to find that Detective Swan is already there, and that there are two wrapped presents on her desk.

"What's all this?" she asks stiffly. The younger detective had tried to call her yesterday. Several times, actually, but Regina had ignored every attempt, unable to face the almost certain heartbreak awaiting her. She's not sure which scenario would hurt more: Emma rejecting her and telling her their almost-kiss meant nothing, or Emma returning her feelings and Regina having to lie that it meant nothing to *her*. Because unless they ignore it, one of those two things has to happen: this is not something they can pursue.

"The flat one is a thank-you gift from Henry," Emma explains before looking down awkwardly and mumbling, "and the one in the paper bag is an I'm-sorry gift from me."

"You have nothing to be sorry about."

"But I am. Saturday night...I clearly made you uncomfortable. I mean, you ran, you ignored my calls, you didn't show up for our run this morning – unless you started super early without me or something. And I

just – I got caught up in an emotional moment," Emma sighs, furiously picking the eraser off a pencil with her fingernails.

Regina stares at her feet. So, it's the first option. She tries to breathe, tries to compose herself, but her chin is quivering and the fact that her heart is shattering into a million pieces is written clearly across her face.

"Apology accepted, dear," she just barely manages to choke out. "It was a confusing, emotional day. I think we both got caught up in...something."

"Yeah, good thing Henry decided to interrupt before it got too heated, huh?"

"Yes, thank goodness for Henry's insatiable hunger." As wonderful as the boy is, Regina can't quite bring herself to smile at the mention of his name. *What would have happened,* she wonders, *if he hadn't interrupted?* Would they have kissed? She feels her face heat up and her heart begin to flutter at the very thought, and the desire to press her lips against her partner's right now, in the middle of the squad room, is so strong that to resist is excruciating.

Emma nods, looking fairly upset, herself. "So, can we just...agree to forget that ever happened?"

"Is that what you want?" Regina asks, hoping against hope that the pain swimming around her heart and throat and behind her eyes stays out of her voice.

"It's...I don't even know what I want," Emma admits, her face looking honest and vulnerable and so very *young*. "But I think that's what has to happen if, you know, we want to be able to work together and stuff." She searches Regina's expression with huge, terrified eyes and asks, "That...you want that, right? To still work together?"

"Of course," Regina says quickly. With Emma looking at her like that, any other answer is unthinkable.

Emma breathes a sigh of relief, leaning hard against the edge of her desk.

"So, we'll just...wipe Saturday from our memories?"

"We don't have to wipe all of it," Emma says. "I mean, unless you want me to, but there are some parts that might be kind of nice to remember." She gestures to the package on Regina's desk. "For example, I think Henry would like to remember all the fun he had riding with you."

Regina nods and swallows the boulder-sized lump in her throat. "I would also like to remember that," she says softly.

"By the way, do you want to open that? I promised I'd let him know your reaction as soon as you did. You don't have to open mine, though – it's just a cannoli."

"Well, I'm sure I'll enjoy that as a late breakfast." Regina clears her throat and forces a smile, gingerly lifting Henry's gift with trembling fingertips. Ever so carefully, she peels off the wrapping paper and pulls out a handwritten book, bound with yarn, entitled *The Adventures of Prince Henry and Queen Regina*.

"It's only chapter one," Emma explains. "He's hoping to have more adventures with you to write about in the future."

"This is beautiful," Regina breathes, turning reverently to the first page, where she sees an adorable, childish cartoon illustration of a little boy struggling to wield a sword that's far too big for him.

Once upon a time, the book begins, *there was a prince named Henry. He had an amazing family and lots of loyal subjects, but he still felt lonely in his castle. He went on a long journey through the kingdoms, searching for a friend who understood his soul.*

Regina turns to the next page and chuckles at the picture of Prince Henry kneeling before a woman in a fancy dress and tiara that she assumes is supposed to be "Queen Regina."

Finally, in the kingdom of Boston, he met a queen named Regina. She was kind and beautiful, smart and funny, and as soon as he met her, Prince Henry knew that she was meant to be his friend.

The tears springing to her eyes are blurring her vision, and her hands are shaking uncontrollably, but she's still just barely able to flip over the page.

The queen brought the prince to her castle, where she introduced him to her royal steeds. Together, they rode through the kingdom, and the queen educated the prince on proper horsemanship and the flora and fauna of her unique land. The prince had never felt such joy; he felt so safe, and yet so free. He knew that as long as Queen Regina remained his protector, he would never be lonesome again.

Regina has to stop reading – the tears are now streaming down her face, and she's afraid they're going to stain the precious gift in her hands. A strange sound escapes her throat, her shoulders are heaving, and Emma looks concerned.

"Are...are you okay?" her partner asks. "This was meant to make you happy, not..."

Grabbing a tissue from Nolan's desk, Regina quickly blows her nose and nods. "This is the greatest gift anyone has ever given me," she sniffs, delicately fingering her engagement ring through her shirt. Up until five minutes ago, she would have said this ring was the greatest gift anyone had ever given her: belief, unconditional love, the promise

of a future. This book offers the same things, in its own way, and demands nothing in return except, apparently, friendship.

"Have you gotten to the part where they find the lost swan, yet?" Emma asks with a smirk. "He was cackling kind of evilly when he wrote it – I think it's supposed to symbolize me, and I'm guessing the portrayal is a little unflattering."

Regina chuckles through her tears, flipping a few pages forward to see a picture of a furious swan flying headfirst into a tree. "I'm guessing you're right," she says and flips the book to show her partner the illustration.

Emma scowls, though her eyes sparkle with hidden laughter. "Little shit," she mutters affectionately. "Let me see that." Grateful for the reprieve from the emotions quickly threatening to suffocate her, Regina blows her nose again and opens her water bottle to pour a bit onto her hand, enough to wash the tears from her cheeks. It's bad enough her partner has now seen her cry twice; she certainly doesn't need the rest of the squad to come in and witness the scene. She's worked too long and too hard to build her reputation to let all their fear dissipate in one unguarded moment.

"Is there a way I can get in contact with Henry?" Regina asks in a much more even and measured tone. "I'd love to let him know how much this gift means to me."

"Yeah, sure." Emma swipes a post-it note from Jones (it's not like he uses them anyway) and scrawls both an email and a home address. "Whichever you prefer," she explains. "His dad tends to check his email to make sure he doesn't have any stalkers, so if you'd prefer your message to be private, I'd recommend snail mail. Then again, it probably doesn't really matter. It's a thank-you note," she adds with a shrug.

Regina nods and places the note on her desk. "I'll send him something later today," she promises. "But if you talk to him before then, please tell him that I love it."

Emma flashes her a huge grin that makes her heart thump faster – that's going to make all of this so much harder – as Locksley walks in. "Good morning, Swan, Mills," he says politely, regarding Regina with a curious stare. "Regina, do we need to have a meeting now?"

"We...I..." Regina fumbles, pressure building behind her eyes as she glances at her partner and thinks about the way that Emma Swan somehow manages to brighten even her darkest moments. She makes the decision in a split second. Then she presses her lips together tightly and shakes her head. "The meeting will be unnecessary."

"I see. Anything else you want to tell me?" that idiotic bastard asks, playfully smirking.

Regina glares at him before looking down at her feet. "You may have been right," she mutters, knowing he'll never let the damned thing go if

she doesn't just admit it.

"Of course I was," he says smugly (she wants to slap him). Then he grows serious and adds, "There's actually something I'd like to talk to you about – not work related – if you've got a minute."

"Sure, just let me..." She puts Henry's book in her desk drawer, on top of Roland's coloring supplies. "I don't feel like sharing this with the idiots," she tells Emma under her breath.

xx

"Everything okay?" Emma asks Regina as she comes out of Locksley's office. The older detective seems confused, so she elaborates, "With Locksley? You guys aren't fighting again, are you?"

"What? No, not at all," Regina says quickly. "Just...he had a personal favor to ask me. It's not important."

Emma shrugs and says, "Okay," as the lieutenant strides out of his office, looking purposeful and refusing to make eye contact with Regina.

"What have we got?" he barks at Nolan and Jones.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we believe we have identified our Jane Doe!" Nolan says with a flourish. "Zelena Westing, age forty, originally from Boston but most recently a resident of Vancouver."

"Vancouver – so *not* on the East Coast," Regina remarks. "Fascinating."

"Wait, did you say Zelena?" Emma asks, perturbed, staring at the computer-generated image of the woman on the bulletin board.

"Yeah, weird name, huh?" Jones says lightly. "It apparently means 'green,' which is a little ironic since that's the color that she was when we found her, you know?" Nolan looks like he's going to vomit. Emma ignores him and continues staring.

"Swan, you know her or something?" Locksley demands.

"Um...maybe," mumbles Emma. "I...I used to know someone with that name. Like, a really long time ago."

"Do you think it's the same person?" Nolan asks. "I mean, we couldn't find much information about her, so anything you've got could be helpful."

"I..." Emma shifts her weight awkwardly between her feet and stares at her fingernails. "I was five, so...it could be the same person. I don't really know. I guess...I guess she looked similar to the sketch."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Jones asks.

"I...I didn't..."

"Did you not hear her say she was five when they knew each other?" Regina exclaims angrily. "Do you instantly recognize people from over twenty years ago? Besides, I'm guessing she wasn't *green* the last time Detective Swan saw her."

"Definitely not," Emma agrees, shooting her partner a small smile. She'll never stop being grateful that she's somehow managed to worm her way into Detective Mills's good graces, and to stay there in spite of a stupid mistake. "She was seventeen and reasonably healthy – maybe a little malnourished, I guess," she adds with a grimace. *Like most kids who spent a lifetime in foster care.* "But, anyway, her skin was a normal human color at the time."

Locksley asks, "How did you know her?" and Regina shoots him a withering glare.

"Did *you* not hear her say she was five? How does this even matter?"

"No, it's okay. We...um...we lived in a group home together for a short time. Like I said, it was ages ago, but I kind of remember her because she had such an unusual name, and she was the oldest kid there." The searching look in Regina's eyes tells her that her partner knows there's more to this story, but Emma just shakes her head.

"Hmm, so she grew up in the foster system," Nolan muses. "That would explain why we haven't been able to locate any relatives. She wasn't married or anything, either."

"According to Canadian authorities, her last recorded employment there was over two years ago, but we're looking into it more closely," Jones promises. "Vancouver police are searching her last known address, and Blanchard's working on getting us access to her phone records."

Locksley gives them a satisfied nod. "Sounds like we're making progress, then," he pronounces. "I've got a meeting this morning with the commissioner and a representative from the Coast Guard, but feel free to interrupt if there are any updates."

He returns to his office, and Nolan and Jones quickly retreat to their workstation, already picking up phones and discussing the next steps.

"More paperwork?" Emma reluctantly asks Regina.

The senior detective nods. "They'll let us know if there's anything we can help with. Meanwhile..."

"If it's about Zelena, just don't ask, okay?" Emma interrupts.

"I wasn't going to," Regina says immediately. It's obvious that she's lying, but Emma is glad she has the decency to drop it. "I doubt your childhood memories will help us solve the case."

Emma thinks her partner almost looks a little hurt for a second, but it's quickly hidden as she sits down at her desk and opens her file on the Glass case. "I have two more items to prepare for Miss Blanchard," she explains, "and our esteemed suspect will be at the station later to meet with Dr. Hopper so we can rule out his insanity plea."

"Great," Emma grumbles, staring resentfully at the pile of forms on her own desk that need to be filled out. She's still not nearly as fast as her partner, and the paper trail seems never-ending. It doesn't help that she's now distracted by vague and distant memories of her onetime foster sister. They hadn't been close, hadn't even interacted all that much – there was a twelve-year age gap, after all – but they'd had similar histories and had shared a certain bond because of that.

And now Zelena is dead and alone at the age of forty.

The two women work in silence for a few minutes before Regina suddenly looks up. "Do you think," she asks tentatively, "that you would

be willing to help me find an appropriate gift for your son? Later today, perhaps on lunch break?"

"You already gave him the best day of his life; you don't need to give him a gift, too," Emma says in disbelief. "He doesn't need to get spoiled and go through life thinking random people are going to give him things all the time."

"Yes, I know, but...I want to." Regina, Emma observes, is no longer filling out paperwork and has instead returned Henry's book to her desk, staring at it with a mix of love and longing that makes Emma's heart hurt as she remembers some of the *other* events of Saturday.

"Not that you're a random person," she corrects, quickly checking to make sure no one is looking before reaching across their desks to squeeze Regina's hand. "I mean, you're the kind and beautiful Queen Regina. If you really want to, he likes books and video games, he likes fantasy stuff...but seriously, he doesn't really need any more material things. I think, above all, he likes to read, so if you happened to write something for him, even a letter, he'd probably love that best of all."

"I'm not much of a writer," Regina demurs and gently extracts her hand.

"He's in the fourth grade; he doesn't care if you're Shakespeare. He likes *you*."

She pauses for a moment to let that sink in, and Regina looks down, but not before Emma sees the pleased smile tugging at her lips that doesn't quite reach all the way to her heart-wrenchingly sad eyes.

xx

Regina sits at her desk, head in hands, staring at a blank greeting card. She'd spent almost half an hour of her lunch break looking through every card in CVS, trying to find one that felt right. None of them, though, had seemed appropriate to fully illustrate her emotions. Finally, she'd gone with a plain white one, hoping she could call forth her long-forgotten doodling skills to give it a personal touch.

Now, she's struggling even to put pencil to paper.

Dear Henry, she writes in careful cursive.

Henry, I'm not a writer like you, so it's difficult to find the words to express how much your precious gift meant to me.

There. Self-deprecation always works as an introduction. After that, the words seem to flow from her heart and fingertips before her brain can catch up.

It made me laugh; it made me cry. It overwhelmed my heart with joy in a way that I haven't felt in a long time. I'm so glad that you enjoyed our adventure as fully as I did. I loved the opportunity to get to know you and share one of my longtime passions with someone who truly appreciated it.

Henry, you are an amazing young man. I'm not just talking about your gift for story-telling, but about the wisdom and empathy that you bring to each interaction to put everyone around you at ease, even those much older than you.

Perhaps you are too young to know this, but Henry, it was your smile that gave me the courage to do something I have not done in close to eleven years. In that moment, you managed to chase away over a decade of pain and loneliness from my heart, and you'll be pleased to know that Queen Regina felt just as safe and just as free as Prince Henry did. While your book is a truly priceless gift that I will treasure for the rest of my life, I treasure even more the opportunity that you gave me to share in your joy.

Thank you again for everything you have done for me, which is far more than you know. I am honored to have been granted the gift of your friendship, and I eagerly look forward to our next adventure.

-Regina

Is that too much? It might be too much, but she means every word, and somehow she feels that Henry will understand. She glances up at her partner, who is licking powdered sugar off her fingers, and lets out a soft chuckle as she writes in the tiny amount of space remaining at the bottom of the card:

P.S. I promise to take excellent care of our pet swan while you're away. I may have to start by teaching her some manners.

"What are you giggling about?" Emma asks curiously

"I don't giggle."

"Definitely sounded that way to me. What are you writing to my kid? It's not more unflattering stuff about me, is it?"

"Not everything is about you, dear."

"Okay, seriously?" Emma jokes. "I don't know if I can let you two hang out again; that's way too much sass in one place."

Regina thinks her heart nearly stops. *No, it's okay; she's joking*, she reassures herself. How strange to think that, only three days ago, she had hoped she'd never be forced to meet Henry Swan-Cassidy, and now she can't imagine a life without seeing him. "Well, I'm finished writing

now," she snaps. "Are you ready to stop stuffing your face so we can get back to work?"

Then she sighs, disgusted at herself for letting weakness get the better of her, but Emma just stands up to throw out her take-out bag and sweetly says, "Yes, Your Majesty," with a clumsy curtsy, causing both of them to laugh.

xx

The next week at work is one of the strangest in Emma's experience. Most of the detectives' time is devoted to digging up information on their drowning victim, a painfully slow process that seems to be going nowhere. It appears that Emma herself is the only person they can locate who has any connection to Zelena Westing's life – as long ago as it was – so the week is filled with Nolan and Jones asking her awkward questions about her past, leading her to track down as many of her former foster siblings as she can remember to see if any of them have kept in contact with Zelena.

What's depressing is how many of them are relatively easy to find due to being registered with the parole board.

Their stories are all similar. Very few had seen Zelena since she was a teenager, and none in the last ten years since she'd apparently moved to

Vancouver. They all say the same things about her that Emma remembers: she'd been reserved, generally keeping to herself, and always with a hard edge of anger around her that hinted she could become unhinged at any moment (though none remembered her ever actually losing it). Not that anything about her anger seems particularly irrational in hindsight – she'd spent her entire childhood being shuffled between foster homes after her birth parents had abandoned her at the side of a road, much like Emma's, and not before naming her *Zelena* of all things. Emma would be angry, too.

Emma *was* angry, too, until she'd had a very good reason to put it behind her.

"Well, this turned up nothing," complains a disgruntled Regina as they're driving away from MCI-Concord on Wednesday afternoon. "Do you have any people in your past whose memories *aren't* addled by years of drug abuse?"

Emma scowls and says nothing. She doesn't understand what the hell is going on with her partner these days. There are moments, plenty of them, when they seem to have a genuine friendship going, when Regina is so heartfelt and so protective and practically seems to read her mind. There are times when it seems like that awkward incident they've vowed to never speak of again has actually brought them closer.

And then there are moments like this, moments when Regina seems to be turning years of pent-up anger and frustration at her for no reason whatsoever, and Emma has no idea how to deal with it.

Usually, she just ignores it and waits for the apology that generally comes a couple minutes later.

One minute of silence passes, then two. And here it is.

"Emma, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that."

"S'okay," Emma says quickly.

"No...no, it's not," Regina disagrees. "I – will you please accept my apology?"

Emma shrugs. "Sure, but you know you wouldn't have to spend so much energy apologizing if you, like, stopped to count to ten before making angry comments," she offers, only a little snidely. "At least, that's what I learned in kindergarten."

With a heavy sigh, Regina looks down at her feet and mutters, "I know. I'm working on it. I'm...I truly am sorry."

"Okay. Got anything you want to talk about?"

"No."

"Okay," Emma sighs. "You just keep on keeping on, then."

The "E" on the gas gauge begins flashing red, and Regina pulls into a gas station at the side of Route 2. "You need coffee?" Emma asks, popping into the mart as Regina gets ready to fill the tank.

"I've been told I need to switch to decaf," the senior detective grunts.

"Probably a decent idea – all that rage is going to give you high blood pressure," she says under her breath. She orders two medium black coffees, both decaf because she thinks the show of solidarity might earn her back a little goodwill, and when she returns, she passes one cup to Regina, and her partner surprises her by handing over the car keys.

"What's this?" she asks in shock.

"You can drive back to the station," Regina explains impatiently. "Get in before I change my mind."

Adjusting the seat and mirrors takes some time because Emma can't stop staring confusedly at her partner. "Is this an olive branch or something?"

"It's something."

The next few miles pass in silence, with Emma trying her hardest to perfectly follow all traffic regulations while still sneaking glances at her partner every five seconds. It's probably for the best that Regina isn't driving, because she looks fucking exhausted. There are dark circles under her eyes, concealed very poorly with make-up, and her olive-toned skin looks pale and almost sickly.

"Is everything alright, Regina?" she asks.

No response. Maybe she's somehow fallen asleep with her eyes open.

"I can't go running with you tomorrow morning," Regina finally bursts out. Emma blinks once, and then twice, unsure of what that has to do with anything.

"Okay, that's fine. You're not, like, sick or injured or anything, are you?"

"No, it's...it's Locksley's wife's birthday tomorrow," she finally explains. "He usually likes to take his son to leave flowers at her grave, so he can remember his mother."

"Oh. She died, right?" Idiotic question, Swan – she wouldn't have a grave if she were still alive. But her partner barely seems to notice the stupidity of her question.

"About three years ago," Regina replies sadly. "Car accident."

"That sucks," Emma mutters. Regina's gaze is far off when she nods. "You're going with them?"

Regina nods again.

"I know you and Locksley are kind of...close," Emma says tentatively. She can't really think of an appropriate word to describe her partner's hot and cold relationship with their lieutenant. "Did you know her, too? Were you friends?"

"Yes, I suppose we were." From the look in Regina's eyes, Emma guesses there's a bit more to the story, but she chooses not to pry.

"I'm sorry, then," she says quietly. "Losing people is tough." Not that she knows a whole lot about it – she's never had anyone to lose – and Regina seems to know a little too much, so, really, her words are empty, but she says them anyway and feels bad for judging her partner harshly for her behavior. Regina is obviously going through things she'll hopefully never understand.

"Yes, it is." Regina clears her throat and changes the subject. "Speaking of losing people, how are you doing? I can't imagine it's easy for you to

be facing all of these people from your past, and losing your foster sister, even if it's been...a while."

Emma shrugs. "I'm handling it. I mean, it *has* been a while. It's not as if I even thought of her as a sister, you know? She was just someone I lived with. But the hardest part," she admits, "is seeing how alone she was. I mean, there's literally *nobody* who's even spoken to her, and...I don't know. We had similar histories, similar situations. I don't want that to be me in ten years. No one even bothered to report her missing."

"It won't be," Regina immediately protests. "You have a lot of people who care about you."

"I know. Trust me, I know. It's just...I can never shake the feeling that it could all get ripped away, just like that."

"That, I can understand."

xx

They visit Marian's grave on Thursday, just as the sun comes up. Roland solemnly deposits a bouquet of daisies in front of her headstone and says, "Happy birthday, Mama." Then he quickly grows restless and

Regina tries to keep him occupied while Robin kneels on the dewy grass and murmurs inaudibly for a long time.

He's always placed great importance in anniversaries, both happy and sad, and summer is full of the latter variety for them. Marian's birthday means that a little under one month later is their wedding anniversary – that day, Robin will probably be silent and sullen and drink far too much rather than visit the cemetery – and then one week after that is the eleventh anniversary of a night Regina would ideally like to forget.

But she can't think about that, not now, she decides as she lifts Roland onto her back and bounces him up and down while imitating the sounds of a galloping horse. He's getting far too big for this game, and she watches a teary Robin talk to his dead wife and wills him to finish quickly.

She wonders if he gets anything out of this. Can he feel her spirit answer back? *Hey, Marian, can you hear me?* she thinks. She's tried this once, with Daniel – at Marian's behest, actually – one year after his death and felt nothing except weakness and embarrassment. His grave is at the other end of this cemetery, and she hasn't been back since. *If you're there, let me know, because I could really use some of your advice right now.*

They were always very different, but somehow Marian and Regina had become fast friends within their first week at the Academy. "It looks like there are only two of us in this class," Marian had observed after introducing herself. "We'll have to stick together." And stick together they did, with a fierce loyalty that never faded no matter how many times one of them (usually Regina) managed to offend the other.

She still remembers the first time Marian met Robin. They were partnered one day at the shooting range, and afterwards, Marian had told Regina, "He's a fucking idiot," rolling her eyes in a way that had seemed more affectionate than anything else. Then, with a little smirk, she'd added, "I'm going to marry him someday, most likely."

"Why would you marry him if he's an idiot?" Regina had grumbled.

"Everyone's an idiot in some way," Marian had blithely told her. "You just have to find *your* idiot."

"And *he's* your idiot?"

"I think so."

"So, that's it? An hour of shooting guns together and you can already hear wedding bells in the future?"

"That's it. That's true love."

Marian had always been so *certain*, Regina thinks as she turns away. (Robin's shoulders are starting to shake, and idiot or not, he deserves the dignity of not being ogled while he cries.) She had always known

exactly what she wanted and gone after it, no matter what anyone else said, and Regina had both loved and hated her for it.

If you were here, you'd tell me exactly what to do, Regina thinks. *And I'd fight you but eventually have to admit you were right.*

She hears slow, heavy footsteps trudging up behind her. Robin's eyes are red, but he manages a small smile for Roland before picking him up and saying, "C'mere, my boy. Let's not break Auntie Regina's back; I need her in good shape to chase down criminals."

"Daddy, too tight!" Roland complains, trying to squirm out of Robin's hug. Reluctantly, he loosens his arms.

"You good?" Regina asks.

He shrugs and shifts Roland to his hip as they walk back to the car. "Life's short," he says, staring off into the distance. "You have to grab onto the good things before it's too late."

Regina squeezes her eyes shut and curses the eight years of marriage to Marian (or perhaps the three years of living without her) that had apparently made Robin less of an idiot. She knows exactly what advice Marian would give her, but knowing doesn't give her the courage to actually follow it.

xx

On Thursday afternoon, they catch a huge break. The Vancouver police find a business card that had drifted beneath a bookcase in Zelena's old apartment for an private investigator named Walsh Gale, and they fax over a copy because he's located in Boston. Nolan and Jones visit his office and report that he denies any acquaintance with Zelena and has no idea how his business card wound up in her apartment, but a background check on Friday reveals that he has permits for both a .22 caliber pistol and a boat, and a quick review of his financial records shows monthly payments to Zelena's former landlord, whom Vancouver police have been unable to locate.

"So the question is, why was he paying her rent?" Nolan muses. "There were no other tenants in the house, that we know of, and it's the exact same amount she was paying before, according to her tax forms, so it stands to reason that's what it was."

"A relationship?" Jones suggests.

At the exact same time, Regina guesses, "Blackmail?"

"Well, in any case," Locksley says tiredly, "we need to talk to him again. Let's bring him in."

But when the detectives return to his office, they find it's been hastily abandoned. They visit his home address and discover the same thing.

"Alright," Locksley sighs, "this is highly suspicious. I've put a BOLO on Walsh and his car, and I want surveillance on his house and office tonight in case he comes back for anything. I'll have Blanchard try to contact Judge Gold and try to get a warrant."

"You think we have enough to arrest him?" Regina asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Not really, no, but it's worth a shot."

Thus, Emma and Regina find themselves huddled together in a darkened car, parked across the street from Walsh Gale's small townhouse in Jamaica Plain.

"This is exciting," Emma says. "I've never been on a stakeout before."

"It gets old after the first time you have to crawl into the backseat to urinate into a bottle," Regina replies with a scowl.

"Come on, where's your sense of adventure?" Emma wheedles, poking her partner in the ribs with her elbow.

"This may be your first stakeout, but it is my seventeenth," the senior detective explains grimly. "Let's just try to get through this night quietly. Eyes on the house."

Emma takes the binoculars and focuses on the front door. Nothing.

It's Regina who breaks the silence first. "I was...I was just wondering if Henry received my card," she says tentatively.

"Yeah, he did. He loved it. Said you kind of sold yourself short on your writing abilities, though. He thought you did a good job."

"Well, as you said, he's in the fourth grade. I would hope an adult with a solid education would be able to put together some reasonably decent prose," Regina snaps.

Emma rolls her eyes and tries to decide whether it's worth feeling hurt at her partner's tone. "Hey, you don't need to get defensive; that was supposed to be a compliment."

Regina sighs and looks ashamed. "I know, I-"

"You're sorry. Yeah, I know, but this game is getting a little old."

The rest of the night passes in tense silence.

xx

At six-thirty, Locksley calls. "Nothing?" he asks.

"No one's been in there all night," Regina says, voice raspy with exhaustion. "Probably knows we're onto him. I don't think he's coming back."

The lieutenant sighs. "I've sent Booth and Humbert in to replace you. They should be arriving within half an hour. You're free to go as soon as they arrive, and take the rest of the day off. Try to get some sleep, yeah?"

"Alright." Hanging up the phone, Regina turns to Emma and explains their instructions. "Sorry your first stakeout turned out to be a bust," she adds with an apologetic smile.

Emma shrugs. "It's fine," she mumbles, trying (and failing) to stifle a yawn. "Just a little pissed we haven't caught the guy yet, you know?"

"I know," Regina agrees.

As expected, Booth and Humbert pull up behind them a little over ten minutes later, about the same time they see a small movement behind the suspect's fence. Emma radios to the other two detectives, who claim they saw it, too.

"Let's go get this over with, then," Regina says grimly. Emma quickly slips on a Kevlar vest and hops out of the car, drawing her weapon. She waits by the driver's side door for Regina, who is moving a beat more slowly this morning. They're about to cross the street when Emma's entire body suddenly tenses.

"Gun!" she hollers. "Regina, get down!" The next thing Regina knows, there's a loud bang and she's being shoved to the ground as a bullet whizzes past her ear and Emma is firing shot after shot at someone she can't even see. She sees Booth and Humbert out of the corner of her eye, a little way down the street, jumping out of their car to chase down a tall, thin man who takes off sprinting after throwing his gun through the air.

She hears a small crash on her left side where the gun lands, and another, louder one on her right, followed by the thump of a body landing on pavement, and then she turns her head to see her partner lying

next to her, bleeding from the back of her head where it hit the car and from a gunshot wound to her shoulder, right where her vest's coverage stops. Her eyes are closed.

"Emma!" Regina yelps. She feels her mind completely shut off as her body moves on autopilot – she rips off her blazer from under her vest and places it beneath the other woman's head, pressing her hands against her shoulder to stop the much more profuse bleeding from the bullet hole. "Emma, wake up!"

Emma is unresponsive.

Somewhere, deep down in the depths of her mind where an ounce of reason still resides, she knows that Emma is still alive, that people don't die from shoulder wounds and that they have bulletproof vests for a reason, that she was probably just knocked out momentarily by the impact of her head on the car door when she fell, but there's blood trickling down to the pavement and blood staining her hands and blood, so much blood, and Emma's eyes won't open.

Humbert hollers that he and Booth have apprehended the shooter and radioed for an ambulance which is four minutes out. His voice sounds like he's underwater, and the world fades and blurs around Regina until the only thing she can see vividly is her partner's face, pale and unmoving where it was once full of laughter.

"Four minutes, Emma," she says desperately, "just hold on for four minutes."

The other woman still doesn't respond, and Regina feels a bloodcurdling scream escape her throat and hears a hoarse, despairing voice that doesn't sound like her own begging, "Please, Emma! Please don't leave me." She collapses, weeping, over her partner's motionless body, her only comfort the faint, faint sensation under her cheek of a heartbeat that might just be her imagination. "Please, Emma, come back to me," she whispers over and over until the sound of sirens draws closer and paramedics pull her off, trembling uncontrollably, and lift both women into stretchers.

"Detective, we're going to need to check you for injuries," the well-meaning EMT says to Regina, in a soft, pleasant tone that's supposed to be calming but just distresses her more.

"Don't touch me!" Regina shrieks. "Don't touch me, I'm fine! Help Emma!"

"Ma'am, I need you to lie down," he tries again, gently pushing her back on to the stretcher as it gets lifted into the ambulance.

She fights viciously against him, arms flailing. "I told you I'm fine. Emma! Where is Emma?" she gasps. She finally catches sight of her partner a few feet over, there's an oxygen mask strapped to her face and layers of gauze are being piled into her shoulder wound to try and stop the flow of blood. "Emma!" Regina cries.

Suddenly, the same EMT is in her face. "Hey," he says, kindly but firmly, "if you want us to be able to take care of your partner, you're going to need to calm down a little, okay?"

Regina replies with a gasping, painful sob. "She's going to be fine," he reassures her, "just try to breathe...there you go." He flashes her an encouraging smile, as she tries her best to take anything but the shallowest of breaths through the agonized cries that are shaking her entire body, before saying into his radio, "We've got a gunshot wound to the shoulder and possible concussion. Major blood loss – gonna need several units of O-neg."

Regina isn't exactly sure what happens after that. It's all a blur of people touching her and people touching Emma and the world moving in slow motion and ringing in her ears that ends with them apparently determining Regina is uninjured and wheeling Emma into surgery while she collapses, alone, on the waiting room floor, staring in horror at the blood staining her fingers.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I don't know how many different ways to say that I'm immeasurably grateful for all the support I've received for this fic so far, so I'll just keep repeating myself in the hope that you will all get the message. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for all of your awesome reviews and messages (I've tried to reply to all, but if I've missed you, I'm sorry). Thank you for following, favoriting, etc. Thank you to all the people who have recommended and promoted it, and a super special thank you to whoever nominated it/me for a SQ fan award. Seriously, guys, I'm relatively new to this fandom, and you have all been so amazingly loving and supportive. I'm just so, so thankful for everything.

And I was so excited that I wrote this loooong chapter for you extra fast! Special thanks to bariz for answering some medical questions for me. It's ~99% Regina and 100% angst, but rest assured that in Chapter 13 there will be plenty of SQ moments and some care-giving fluff.

That was the happy message. Now here is a not so happy one:

IMPORTANT! READ THIS FIRST! Trigger/content warning for extreme violence (including murder and rape), death, blood, and PTSD in the first section of this chapter. It is mostly contained to the italicized portions, but if you are extra sensitive to any of those things, I would recommend reading ahead to the first break line. (In case you choose to do that, I will provide a brief synopsis of what you'd miss: While in the hospital waiting room, Regina has a flashback to White's attack. It's not pretty.)

I needed a hug after writing that, so I'll totally understand if you need to forego reading it for whatever reason. The rest of the chapter should be fairly safe, although obviously she's going to be dealing with the aftermath of the shooting and the flashback.

There's a gentle breeze coming in through the window, a welcome relief from the sweltering hot and stagnant summer air, when Regina begins to stir. She thinks that maybe she has to use the bathroom again, but she's so comfortable for once that she can barely contemplate moving. Daniel is pressed against her back, and she can hear his soft snores from just behind her ear as his hands unconsciously caress her belly, drawn to their baby even in sleep. It's a bit warm – they've kicked the sheets to the floor and there's a thin sheen of sweat covering both of their bodies – but it's cozy and safe and secure until Regina has a thought that immediately sets her on edge:

When they'd gotten into bed, the window had been closed.

Cracking one eye, she sees that it's not only open, it's broken, and someone has removed the screen. She urgently grabs her fiancé's arm and shakes it. "Daniel," she hisses. "Daniel, wake up!"

A grunt, and then a moan. "R'gina? Wha-"

"Hello, Regina," says a cold voice she hasn't heard in months. The sound alone is enough to make her feel like her veins have been

injected with ice water, but looking up into his eyes, glinting dangerously in the moonlight, sends her entire body into a terrified spasm. "Didn't think you'd ever see me again, did you?"

"Regina!" Booth's voice is above her head, frantic. "Regina, what happened? Where's Emma? Are you okay?"

"Em...Emma...surgery," she chokes out, trying to look up at him, to call her mind back to the present before the true nightmare begins. But his face swims and blurs before her eyes and all she can see is red.

Red blood, dripping down her hands.

Emma's blood.

Daniel's blood.

"Don't you touch her," Daniel growls, fully alert in an instant. He throws himself on top of her and she feels like her spine is about to break from the impact. "You're not going to lay a finger on her ever again, White."

He laughs and she screams, because before Daniel even knows what's happening, White has drawn a sharp, curved knife and is holding it to his throat. "You thought you could protect her," White sneers. "You

don't even know her. She's a liar and a whore and she doesn't deserve protecting."

"Regina," Daniel chokes, a small droplet of blood sliding down his neck as he struggles against the knife, "Regina, I love you."

"Love, how sweet," White mocks. "You think she loves you? Do you even know whose child she's carrying?"

"Mine," Daniel says confidently, and White slices the knife across his throat in one swift motion and his body goes limp on top of her.

"Daniel!" Regina cries. She scrambles to flip him over, pressing a pillow against his neck, but it won't stop the bleeding. There's blood everywhere, soaking the sheets, the pillowcase, her nightgown. "No! Daniel, please."

She thinks she hears White cackling wickedly at the foot of the bed, but she can't think about him, not now. Her fear of him is secondary now to her fear of losing Daniel. Their cell phones are in the kitchen – she wonders if she can make a break for it and call for an ambulance before he catches her. But she doesn't want to leave Daniel.

"Regina," he whispers, weakly lifting one hand up to stroke her cheek before letting it fall to rest on her belly, "tell Henry I love him."

"Daniel, no! Daniel, please don't leave me." She's sobbing hysterically and pressing herself on top of him, willing him to hold on just a little longer, until she can figure out how to get both of them to safety.

"I'm sorry," he says, and then his face slackens as the life departs from his eyes.

"No!" Regina screams. "Daniel! Daniel, come back to me!" Her tears mix with his blood as she weeps onto his bare chest, ears straining for the sound of a pulse that no longer exist. "No," she cries, "no!" and she holds him and sobs as the body that was so warm against hers just moments ago grows colder and colder until the entire room feels frozen.

"I don’t know what's going on," Booth is saying. "She's not responding. She just keeps saying no, over and over."

"Maybe she's in shock, from the shooting?" someone suggests. It's Humbert – Humbert's voice. Booth is here, and Humbert, and they're in a hospital, not her bedroom. "She won't stop shaking."

"Here, let me." It's a female voice, rough and no-nonsense. It's a nurse. There's a nurse in front of her, leaning in close to her face. "Honey, are you injured?"

She thinks she opens her mouth, but she doesn't hear anything come out of it.

"Come on, let me help you get up," the nurse says, reaching out to grab hold of her arm.

"No!" Locksley's voice – from down the hall – his footsteps are approaching fast, but not fast enough. "Don't touch her wri-"

His hands roughly grab her shoulder, rolling her onto her back. She's still clutching Daniel's corpse, hoping in vain that this will all be a bad dream and in a moment he'll start kissing her forehead to wake her up and hold her close until her tears subside. But White pulls him out of her arms and, before she can fully comprehend what's happening, he's holding her wrists tightly above her head and climbing on top of her, knife perilously close to the curve of her abdomen, and he's seething with rage.

"You thought you could hide this from me," he growls. "You thought you could just disappear?"

She's struggling, straining her arms against his painfully tight grasp, but each time, the knife gets closer and closer until the can feel the blade against her through the thin fabric of her nightgown.

"Don't fight it, Regina, you never did before."

"I couldn't blow my cover before," she grits out, determined to be strong, to appear fearless to him despite the tears and snot running down her face that reveal the opposite. "Now I don't care if you know exactly what I think of you."

"You don't care?" he taunts.

Her response is to spit in his eye. His face turns purple, and in an instant his knife is against her throat and she almost sighs with relief because so many people have threatened her life before that it feels like nothing compared to a threat against Henry's. Unfortunately, he chooses that moment to be perceptive, and the blade is back on her stomach in an instant.

"You want me, you always did," he hisses.

"No."

"You say you want me, or my knife is inside you."

He's serious. "I want you," Regina says robotically.

Daniel, forgive me, she thinks.

He lowers the knife and starts hiking up her nightgown, and she resumes the futile struggle to free her wrists, letting out a scream that causes him to leap forward and smash his fist into her mouth. There's a sickening crack as her jaw breaks and the pain shoots through her whole face; her entire body trembles, fighting against the sobs threatening to burst out of her at any second, but she can't – she won't – let him win. "You don't scream or fight, or your baby dies."

If she didn't already believe he was serious about all of his threats, the sting of cool metal slicing ever so slightly through the fabric of her nightgown and nicking the top layer of her skin would have convinced her. She squeezes her eyes shut and lets him. It hurts – oh gods, it fucking hurts – but she allows only the smallest of whimpers to escape her throat. She hates herself for every second of it, but her pride is not worth her child's life. Saving Henry is all that matters; White can take away the last shred of her dignity, but he will not take her baby from her. She can be strong for Henry.

He finishes, and she cries with an excruciating mix of grief and shame and relief, and he laughs. He laughs and laughs and plunges the knife into her stomach anyway, and she screams and then he hollers and jumps backwards because he was apparently not expecting the amount of fluid that had gushed out, and Regina's vision is slowly going black, but she remembers just then that Daniel's gun is in the nightstand drawer.

She's going to kill White; he will pay for all he's taken from her if it takes her last breath. With the tiny amount of strength remaining in her body, she reaches for it, arms trembling so violently that she can barely keep her finger on the trigger, and then –

"Regina, put the gun down," Locksley says. Someone is pressing something cold and wet against her skin and Locksley is in front of her, gently coaxing her hands down, and she realizes that her service revolver is pointed directly at his face. "Come on, Regina, drop the gun," he repeats slowly, voice soft and soothing despite the fact that she's probably scaring him shitless. "You're safe, okay, you're safe. No one's going to hurt you."

Her hands are shaking and her chest is heaving and tears are streaming down her face, but she must be lowering the gun because Robin is smiling encouragingly at her and saying "good job" and she hears people sigh with relief. He tugs her weapon out of her hand and passes it over to Jones. She looks up and sees him whisper something to Nolan. Booth and Humbert are on Locksley's other side, and the five of them are forming a semicircle around her to shield her from passerby (or, more likely, to shield the passerby from her).

"Regina," Locksley says softly. Her heart feels like it's about to explode out of her chest and she can't breathe and she can't stop shaking. The room feels like it's spinning all around her and she's afraid she's going to be sick.

Twenty seconds later, she vomits all over Locksley's shoes.

Some well-meaning nurses keep trying to lift her up by the arms, but he turns them away. "Don't fucking touch her," he growls. Then, in a much gentler tone, "Regina, do you know where you are?"

"Hospital," she croaks.

"Good. What day is it today?"

She doesn't even remember after being awake for so long. "Friday...no, Saturday. June seventh?" she guesses.

"That's right. Can you tell me five things you see?"

Regina nods, slowly and painfully, "You, Nolan, Jones, Booth, Humbert." Perhaps she should be upset that they just witnessed all of that, but she can't quite bring herself to care.

"Yeah, okay, we're people, not things, but that works, too. You're safe here. You just had a flashback; it wasn't real."

"Flashback, not real," she repeats.

"White's in jail; he can't hurt you anymore. It's 2014."

She nods again and looks around confused, forgetting for a second why the hell she's in a hospital (sitting on the floor in the hallway, of all places). Then she looks down at her hands and sees the blood and it comes back to her in a sickening crash.

"Emma," she gasps as a sharp pain shoots through her abdomen and she doubles over, curling into the fetal position on the floor. "Where is Emma?"

She thinks that Locksley might be explaining where Emma is, but she doesn't hear anything past the ringing in her ears and everything is getting fuzzy again. She thinks she feels someone's arms lifting her up, and then she's on some sort of soft surface and someone is forcing her to swallow a pill.

"It will help you calm down," she thinks she hears someone explain, and she hopes they're right because her breaths are shallow and furious and she's afraid she might pass out if she can't get some oxygen soon. Slowly, it does, and as her heart starts to beat at a more manageable rate and her chest can expand, she's starts to become aware of her surroundings instead of her frantic need for air.

She's on a bed, in a treatment room, and her crowd of onlookers has disappeared, although Locksley is by the door, arguing with a doctor.

"Trust me, she's been dealing with this for over ten years," he's saying. "The hospital is part of the problem, not the solution."

"And what exactly are you suggesting?" the doctor demands, and Regina stops listening.

She's been awake for over twenty-four hours; she'd spent the night cramped in a stuffy car with a woman she can't seem to sort out her feelings for; then, she had watched that woman get shot, had her first flashback to the White incident in over five years and a complete breakdown in front of all of her coworkers, and now she's probably about to be admitted. This day could not possibly get any worse.

Well, maybe if her mother showed up.

She tries to hold back the hot, frustrated tears that are springing to her eyes because they don't need any more reasons to make her stay here. But it may be too late to avoid it.

She's surprised when, a few minutes later, Locksley comes over and asks, "How are you feeling? Do you think you're okay to walk?"

"Why?"

"I'm taking you home."

"How did you..."

"Confidential. Is that okay with you?"

He looks worried, for a second, like she's going to say no. Does he think she wants to stay *here*? "It's okay," she confirms, though her voice cracks and it's clear that absolutely nothing is okay, but he thankfully pretends not to hear it.

"Excellent. Do you need any help standing up?"

"No."

She pushes herself out of the bed quickly – too quickly, perhaps, because every inch of her body is still trembling with pain and fear and her legs feel like jelly, and she almost sinks to the floor before she can take a single step forward. Robin holds out his arm for her to lean on as they make their way slowly out of to the parking lot. He doesn't speak, which is the only thing that makes any of this acceptable.

He opens the passenger-side door of his car and motions for her to get in. "I'll give you a few minutes alone to get it all out," he says. "Just...try not to break my windshield, yeah?"

As soon as the door slams shut, Regina opens her mouth and all the wails she'd been trying to hold back come bursting forth, and she

punches the dashboard until her knuckles bleed and screams and screams and screams until she can't scream anymore.

Regina stands, wringing her hands in Robin's living room, staring dumbly after him as he bustles around so quickly it confuses her. "Sit," he says, and she sinks onto the sofa as he disappears into the kitchen. He's back a minute later with a bag of frozen peas.

"Ice," he directs her. She just looks at it with wide, blank eyes until he explains, "It's for your hands," and she finally looks down and sees the mess she's made of them. She flinches as the cold burns her swelling knuckles, but the sensation gradually dissipates and her hands grow comfortably numb.

He's rifling through a cardboard box of Marian's old stuff that he "hasn't gotten around to throwing away yet," eventually pulling out a faded pair of flannel pants and a UMass t-shirt.

"Pajamas?" she asks.

"That pill the doctors gave you to calm you down? Lorazepam – it's apparently a sedative. It might make you start feeling sleepy soon, if being awake for twenty-four hours straight didn't already do the trick. And, well...that suit might not be comfortable, and I'd prefer not to have blood all over my furniture."

She looks down at the red and brown stains covering her shirt and thinks she might be sick again.

"Marian was thinner than me," she mumbles, just for the sake of arguing. "They won't fit."

Robin rolls his eyes and looks like he's trying very hard to keep his tone calm and pleasant. "They're pajamas; they're designed to be loose-fitting. Would you rather wear my clothes?" She scowls. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Anyway, you need a shower before you change? Wash off all the blood?"

Yes, she does, for more reasons than just the blood. She knows he knows that, but he pretends he doesn't, and it may just be a little thing, but she's grateful anyway.

He offers her a hand, but she ignores it and pushes off the sofa herself, keeping her head down as she trudges to the bathroom.

She hurriedly strips off her suit and turns on the shower, but as she reaches for the shampoo bottle next to the sink, she happens to catch sight of her reflection in the mirror. There's blood – a bit of her own but mostly Emma's – and there's her scar, still thick and white and jagged and still *there*. His mark, his brand. Irrefutable proof of her weakness and his ownership over her, and the next thing she knows, she's grabbing the bottle and hurling it at the mirror, and there's a satisfying crash as it breaks into a million tiny pieces all over the linoleum floor.

"Regina!" she hears Locksley's voice, loud and concerned, and his footsteps quickly approach the bathroom. "Regina, is everything alright in there?"

She doesn't respond, and she hears a tired sigh from just outside the door. "Stupid question," he says under his breath. Then, loudly again, "Regina, I'm coming in to clean that up. Close the shower curtain if you don't want me to see you."

Almost robotically, she follows his orders, sinking to her knees on the floor of the tub as her legs give out from underneath her. She can hear the sound of a broom sweeping the glass shards and Robin muttering something to himself. Then he calls, "Washcloth, incoming!" and two seconds later a red washcloth comes flying over the top of the curtain and lands on her head. "Don't use the dark green one in there," he warns. "It's exfoliating, and...well, that's gross."

"You exfoliate?" she tries to mock him, but her voice is hoarse and her mouth won't form words the way she wants it to, so she just nods even though he can't see her and starts scrubbing every inch of her crawling skin until it's red and raw and excruciating but still somehow not quite clean. Ten minutes later, she's still at it and the bar of soap is gone. She'll have run up quite the bill by the time her stay at Hotel Locksley is over, she thinks darkly: new shoes, new mirror, new soap...who knows what else?

Sighing heavily, she lowers herself back down to the floor and hugs her knees to her chest, unwilling to move until the water turns to ice or Locksley decides he's too worried to respect her privacy, whichever comes first. She sits and she cries and she thinks about White, but

mostly she thinks about Emma and how she's failed her. She swore she wasn't broken, swore this wouldn't affect her work, and yet here they are. Because of her weakness, Emma is lying unconscious in a hospital bed.

Because of her weakness, Henry could have lost his mother if the angle of the bullet had been slightly different.

I told him I would take care of her, she thinks as a fresh wave of tears springs to her eyes.

She's not sure exactly how long she stays there, but eventually Locksley's hand reaches in to turn off the water, and there's a towel thrown on top of her, and she slowly lifts her shivering and aching body from the tub and slips into Marian's pajamas. They're soft and warm and smell like wildflowers, and they slide over her hips without a single tug of resistance, and she wonders briefly if perhaps she's lost weight and that's something she should be worried about.

She returns to the living room to see that Locksley has piled probably every blanket in the entire apartment on the couch.

"I want to go see Emma," she croaks.

"Emma will be fine. She's under the care of expert trauma surgeons who can help her a lot better than you can right now. You can see her later, when both of you are stable. For now, why don't you get some rest?"

She wants to argue, wants to desperately to fight against him and force him to drive her to the hospital immediately so she can hold Emma and tell her how sorry she is, but she's practically asleep on her feet, and anyway, he's probably right, so instead she just dissolves into silent tears and crawls under the twenty-or-so blankets she's been provided so that only her nose and eyes are exposed.

"You want Roland's stuffed monkey?" Robin offers.

Regina shakes her head and wraps her arms around herself. "Okay," Robin says softly, and he perches on the armrest by her feet, loading his gun and placing it in front of him on the coffee table, where he can reach it but she definitely can't. "I'll keep watch," he promises.

She squeezes her eyes shut and tries to keep her sobs relatively quiet while Robin starts humming some old James Taylor song to himself to pretend that he can't hear her. The sedative properties of Lorazepam must be stronger than she'd thought, or maybe she's just that exhausted, because the next thing she knows everything is warm and dark and she's not dreaming of anything at all.

Regina wakes to the sound of soft voices talking above her and a finger running lightly up and down her cheek. Blearily, she blinks and stares at the blue and green floral print of the fabric beneath her. This is not her couch.

"We'll just have to play it by ear," the voice is saying. Locksley's voice. Locksley's couch. She feels slightly nauseous as the morning's events come back to her all in a rush, considers rushing to the bathroom, but everything hurts too much to move. How much would it cost to re-upholster Locksley's couch after she vomits on it? Would he be angry or grateful?

Also, why the hell is he touching her face like that? They've had their boundary issues in the past, different understandings of personal space, especially after White had caused Regina's bubble to expand by about a three-foot radius, but he knows now. He wouldn't, not after today. But the only person who ever touches her like that wouldn't be here right now.

"I keep saying that if things that happen on the job are going to trigger her, she should get a different job! How on earth is *this* supposed to help her healing?"

Or, apparently, she would be here. *Why?* Regina thinks desperately. If there is a higher power, she's fairly certain they hate her. She takes in a huge gulp of air as the nausea intensifies, willing herself not to throw up all over her mother, who is sitting beside her on the carpet, cross-legged in one of her weekend pants suits.

"Healing from trauma works differently for everyone," Robin is saying diplomatically, "and Regina and her doctors believed that returning to work would help her face her fears and regain control. Which, it did, to a point."

"To a point. She *was* making progress; it was slow, but it was real. And now, almost eleven years later, something like today happens, and she's back to square one. How long is this supposed to go on?"

"Square one is...well, we don't know that. This is the first time this has happened in – I don't even know, maybe five years?"

Regina lets out the breath she's been holding in and decides to let them know she's conscious before they start rehashing her entire medical history. "Mama?" she whimpers. Not quite as dignified as she would have liked, but she doesn't seem to have much control over her voice.

"Hello, darling," says Cora, pushing a lock of hair behind Regina's ear.

"Mama, why are you here?"

"My shareholders' meeting last night ran late, so I decided to stay in Boston and drive back to Storybrooke this morning," Cora explains simply.

"But why are you *here*?" Her mother hates driving at night, that's nothing new, but it doesn't explain why she's in her stocking feet on Locksley's living room floor.

"Go back to sleep, sweetheart. Robin says you were on a stakeout all night and then had a bit of a rough morning. You need to rest."

Regina blinks and waits for the judgmental remark she's sure will follow, but there's nothing. She turns to Robin and rasps, "Emma?"

"Out of surgery," he reports quickly. "Bullet's been removed, and she's conscious. She's not entirely out of the woods yet with her head injury, but it's not life-threatening. She's stable. I'm about to go see her, actually. Would you like me to pass along a message?"

"I..."

I love you.

I hate you.

How could you do this to me?

I'm sorry I couldn't protect you.

You can't leave me.

"I don't know."

"You can see her later," Cora suggests, "maybe when you're feeling a bit better."

Regina wants to laugh at the idea of feeling better, but it comes out as a barely choked-back sob. "I'm trying, Mama."

Cora clears her throat and sighs. "I know," she says softly.

Regina closes her eyes. She's so confused and she wants to scream and she wants to ask who this imposter is and what the hell she's done with her harsh and critical mother, but in the end her exhaustion wins out. She keeps her eyes shut and sinks into the sofa and lets the obviously-fake Cora smooth her blankets and whisper things that she doesn't quite catch as she drifts off again into her dark and dreamless oblivion.

She wakes up again a few hours later – or she assumes several hours must have passed because the light has changed and she can hear Roland's voice coming from his room in an exaggerated whisper, like he's been admonished to play quietly. There's a baseball game on TV, closed-captioning flashing across the bottom of the screen to avoid waking her with the volume, and Robin is watching intently from the floor, leaning against the other side of the couch near her feet.

"I can move," she volunteers, her voice husky and strained from sleep and a morning full of screaming, "so you can sit on the couch."

"Hey, look who's awake," he says warmly. "Welcome back."

Regina grunts and slowly pushes herself to a half-sitting position, drawing her feet toward her just enough to leave room for him. He gives her a grateful smile and slides into the open space.

"So, Emma says hi," he continues, looking a little cautious. "She's got a broken collarbone and a pretty decent concussion, but besides a bit of pain and dizziness, she seems to be doing well, all things considered. They're going to keep her overnight for observation, and she's looking at six to twelve weeks of recovery time, but the doctors are very optimistic."

She'd like to say something but there's a lump in her throat the size of a small boulder and her tongue feels swollen and everything is a little sluggish, so she just nods.

There's a pleasant smell wafting in from the kitchen, and her mother – how had she forgotten her mother was here? – comes in a moment later wearing oven mitts and holding two bowls of soup. She passes one to Robin and then squeezes herself onto the couch, on Regina's other side, and says, "I thought you might be hungry, darling. I made broccoli cheddar."

"I'm not," Regina mumbles. Then, belatedly, she remembers her manners and says, "Thank you, though."

"I'd like you to try at least a few bites," Cora says in the same strict, no-nonsense tone she'd used when Regina was a picky toddler before her voice softens a little, and she adds, "If the soup is too much for you, I've got a baguette I can slice."

Regina shrugs, which Cora seems to interpret as assent. The older woman immediately rises and returns to the kitchen, leaving her daughter on the couch with confusion that's grown a lot more intense now that her mind has rested enough to begin to process what's happening.

"I'm sorry," Robin whispers when Cora's out of the room. "She pretty much forced herself in here, and I don't know how to make her leave. She's a decent cook, though." He takes a bite of his soup and gives a contented hum.

"It's okay," Regina says reflexively.

"Is it?"

"I don't know," she admits.

"For what it's worth, she seems genuinely-"

She doesn't get to find out what Cora seems, because Robin immediately stops talking as soon as the subject of his remarks returns to the room, carrying a plate full of bread.

"At least one slice," she orders her daughter, who groans as she tries to grab a piece and pain shoots through her swollen, purple fingers. The bread tastes like sand in her mouth, and it's all she can do to swallow without gagging.

Once she's successfully gotten it down, she turns to Cora and asks, "What are you doing here?"

"My shareholder's meeting ran-"

"You said that already," Regina interrupts. She's not sure what exactly has come over her; she rarely interrupts her mother and *never* uses such a rude tone with her. Perhaps it's the knowledge that whatever Cora's response is, it can't make her feel any worse. Regina waits for the lecture that doesn't come and feels vaguely disappointed. She's not sure what's come over Cora, either.

"I'm going to check on Roland," Robin announces abruptly, picking up his soup to take with him like he thinks it might take a long time.

When the door closes, Cora explains, "I was on my way back to Maine when I stopped at a convenience store to use the restroom. There was a TV, and a local news channel was showing footage from the shooting."

Her mother's words sink slowly into Regina's befuddled mind, and she blinks as she begins to make sense of them. "How was there footage?" she asks, probably the least pressing of all of her questions, but also the least painful.

"How should I know? It looked grainy, like someone took it with a cell phone camera, but I recognized you."

"Oh." Regina rubs her eyes and braces herself for what is sure to be a much more upsetting conversation: "How much did you see?"

"I..." Cora inhales sharply, and for a second a look of sheer terror crosses her face, and Regina is confused. "The angle was...I saw you go down," she finally says. "It looked like you had been shot."

"Oh."

"Yes: oh." After a moment of silence, Cora continues. "I spent an hour or so calling every hospital in the Greater Boston area to see if you were being treated there before finally thinking to contact Robin, and...well, here you are."

"Here I am," Regina agrees in a monotone, staring down at her hands. "I'm sorry I ruined your morning, Mother."

Cora smiles wryly and says, "I'm guessing yours was worse."

Who are you, and where is my mother?

"You know, your father and I met with our attorney yesterday to update our will," Cora says, and Regina wonders where she's going with this. "I never thought about it. I never...when the whole White thing happened, I didn't find out about it until it was already confirmed that you would fully recover." Regina nods slowly, remembering that her mother had been at a conference in London at the time. The fact that she didn't have to deal with Cora's judgment had been her single source of solace during those first few days in the hospital. "And then, I knew, of course that you had been seriously injured, that you could have died, but I didn't...I didn't truly think about it. I didn't allow my mind to go there, because the idea was just...it was unthinkable."

"But then, today...today when I saw the news, I just..." She trails off and looks down.

Regina's eyes widen, and she wonders if *Cora Mills* is about to cry.

"For almost an hour, I didn't know what had happened to you; I was worried sick; I couldn't call your father because I knew he wouldn't have been able to handle it. I was-"

Yes, those are tears. They're not falling, but they're definitely there.

Cora swallows, takes a long, slow breath, and continues, "For the first time, the thought occurred to me that I might not be able to leave you the house, or the stock portfolio, or anything – that I might have to bury my child instead of the other way around, and, Regina...I realized that was something that I would never, ever be able to get over."

Regina feels her lips and chin trembling. She thinks this may be the first time she's ever seen her mother get emotional. Perhaps at any other point in her life, she would have been gratified that it was about her, and that it sounded almost like an apology of sorts, but today it's just terrifying and overwhelming and she doesn't have the energy to handle it.

"Mama," she whispers, tentatively reaching out a hand toward Cora. Whether she's offering comfort or seeking it, she's not entirely sure. With a small smile, Cora takes it and gently draws it to her lips, kissing each of Regina's bruised and scraped knuckles with as much love and tenderness as she's ever shown in her life. It doesn't have the healing effect on her hands that mothers' kisses are supposed to have, but Regina thinks that her heart might feel a little better.

Then Cora looks her daughter up and down and grimaces. "We're going to have to find a comb around here somewhere," she says, "and see if there's anything more presentable for you to wear. You can't visit Emma in the hospital dressed like that."

Regina sinks back with a sigh of relief as the tiniest of smiles tugs at her lips.

Robin pokes his head out of Roland's room and asks, "Is everyone okay out here?"

With a quick glance to confirm that the version of Cora Mills she's known for forty-three years is still beside her (her mother is now running her finger along the coffee table to check for dust and shaking her head at Robin's lack of cleaning skills), Regina nods. "We're good," she confirms.

"How are you feeling about physical contact?" he asks. "Because you've got a godson in here who really wants to give you a hug." When she hesitates, Robin quickly starts to backtrack, "I'll tell him no. It's okay. You don't have-"

"Don't be ridiculous, Robin," she snaps. "I'm not made of glass. I'll be fine with hugging Roland."

He knows better than to voice his doubt, but it's written so clearly across his face that he doesn't have to. She turns her head and pretends

not to hear him coaching Roland to be extra calm and gentle. Roland comes out of his room, as slowly as she's ever seen him move, and approaches her with a serious expression.

"Auntie Gina, can I sit with you?" he asks, and for a second he seems so much older than his four years. Rendered speechless, Regina just nods, and Cora quickly vacates her spot on the couch for the little boy. His dark eyes, wide and solemn, never leave her face as he sits down. "Daddy said you might get scared if I touch you because someone hurt you a long time ago, like Bobo."

Regina's throat and chest are tight as she asks, "Bobo is your dog friend, right?"

"Yeah. He used to be scared, but he's not anymore 'cause he knows I won't hurt him. And I won't hurt you, either. I know how to be gentle."

"Oh, Roland, come here," Regina murmurs, pulling him onto her lap and caressing his round cheeks, still dimpled even when he's not smiling. "I love you so, so much."

"I love you, too. 'Specially," he adds in a tiny whisper, leaning secretively into her ear, "because you teached me not to be an idiot like Daddy."

She wants to burst out laughing.

Instead, she bursts out crying.

Robin is hovering, ready to pounce and pull the boy away and wrap her up in blankets again, and Roland looks confused. "Auntie Gina, are you sad?"

"I was sad," she chokes out through her tears, "but now you're here, so I'm happy."

He seems to accept that response, snuggling into her chest and reaching his little arms up around her neck. His fingers get tangled up in her hair as she holds him close and cries and cries. Robin slowly backs away and lets them be. There's part of Regina that thinks he might be taking note of this scene to use as evidence when he later asks her to pay Roland's therapy bills, but at the moment, she doesn't particularly care.

"So," Robin says a few minutes later when Regina's tears have mostly quieted, "about visiting Emma in the hospital..."

"I want to," Regina replies. Truthfully, the very idea of going back there causes her stomach to flip-flop and her heart to race, but Roland is still squished against her and her face is buried in his thick hair as she kisses his forehead again and again, and he makes her feel braver.

"Right, of course. I was just wondering if you wanted me to take you this afternoon, or would you feel better if you waited until tomorrow? I think visiting hours start at nine."

"Today," she says immediately. She has to get this over with, has to face her fears, and sooner is always better than later. Not to mention, she's aching to see Emma with her own eyes, to ensure that she's alive and well and everyone hasn't been lying to her all day, but Robin isn't allowed to know that, so she just says, "We'll probably be busy at the station tomorrow."

Robin bites his lip and his entire body goes rigid. "Regina, tomorrow's Sunday," he says slowly, as though he's searching for a way to say this that won't absolutely shatter her. "And even if it wasn't..."

"You're not going to the station," Cora says, coming out of the kitchen with a plate and dishtowel in her hands. "Not tomorrow, not the day after that, not for a while."

"But I-"

Robin shoots Cora an irritated glare and reaches out to rub Regina's shoulder before apparently thinking better of it and patting Roland on the head instead.

"What your mother is trying to say," he explains, "is that typically after events like this, as you know well, it's suggested that all the parties

involved take some time off, and that policy will not be waived in this case."

"Robin, I don't need time off," she pleads desperately. "I'm fine, I promise. I can handle this. Please don't make me go on leave."

Sighing, Robin cups his hands over Roland's ears and says, "Regina, you're not fine. You pointed a gun at my face today." She opens her mouth to protest, but he shakes his head. "I know that it wasn't you; I know it was the PTSD, and you know that I will never, ever think any less of you for it, but this isn't something we can just ignore. Even if I wanted to, Internal Affairs would be all over us in a heartbeat."

"But-"

"You are the best detective in our unit and possibly in the whole department. Of course I want you back as soon as possible – hell, we *need* you back as soon as possible. But we need *you*, if you know what I mean."

Regina shakes her head with a dark, humorless laugh. "I don't even know who that is anymore."

"Well, let me tell you a little bit about Regina Mills," Robin says, smiling. "She's pretty smart, and maybe a little too snarky, but surprisingly sweet when she wants to be. She loves deeply and loyally, and she protects the people she cares about like a mama lion, so much

so that she's almost kind of scary sometimes. Oh, and did I mention brave? She's the bravest, strongest person I've ever seen – always has been, but some days the point gets driven home more than others – and I can't think of a single human being I admire more."

Regina sniffs as fresh tears drip down her cheeks. "I concur," Cora voices from the kitchen, and that's a whole other set of emotions she's not prepared to deal with.

"Robin..."

"Even when she teaches my son to call me an idiot."

"Robin, I can't be who I am if I can't work. The job is my life; you know that."

"I know. That's why the plan is to get you back as quickly as possible. I took the liberty of making you an appointment with Dr. Hopper for Monday morning, and I've already told IAB you have my full support to return as soon as he clears you. You're going to get through this Regina, you will, and no matter how long it takes, I'll be here for you."

"I-"

"And so will Emma."

"You can't speak for her," Regina argues.

"She took a bullet for you. I think that speaks for itself."

"She's my partner! That's her duty, and it's...it's just who she is, and I wish she hadn't."

Robin looks troubled. "We can discuss that later, but you should know that she has no regret for her actions."

"She has a head injury. She'll think differently when her brain is fully functional."

"You just told me I can't speak for her," Robin points out. "Well, the same goes for you. But as a person with eyes, I can tell you one thing: that woman adores you."

"I can't imagine why," Regina mutters, given that she spent the entire week prior to the shooting unfairly snapping at Emma in a poor effort to conceal her rapidly overpowering feelings. Robin quickly glances down at his buzzing phone before shaking his head disapprovingly at her.

"I can, but we can continue this conversation later, when your self-loathing has died down a little. On a somewhat related topic, do you feel ready to head to the hospital? Apparently, you're being asked after."

"By whom?" Regina wonders.

Robin either doesn't hear the question or chooses not to acknowledge it. "Roland, do you think you can-"

"I'll watch Roland," Cora volunteers.

Robin and Regina regard her with identical expressions of shock. "I...that's fine," Robin says, forcing himself to recover. "That's...as long as you don't mind."

"It would be my pleasure."

Regina doesn't find her voice until they're out the door. "I preemptively apologize if your son ends up scarred for life from this afternoon," she tells Robin.

He shrugs. "It's a couple of hours, at most. I've left him at John's house overnight, and he survived."

"John is a little...quirky, but he's a generally kind and nurturing person," Regina argues. "My mother is not."

"So, he'll play on his own and she'll just make sure he's safe and well-fed. It's probably less scarring than hanging out with us at the hospital. Besides, she seems a little different today, don't you think?"

"If by different, you mean unstable, then I agree," Regina mutters darkly.

"She thought she had lost her daughter this morning. That's enough to send most people for a loop, but she still seems functional enough to call 911 if Roland falls down the stairs or something."

"Why the hell do you always defend her?"

"Because, for everything she's guilty of, when I look at her, I see the person who made my greatest friend in the world, and that makes me forgiving."

"Well, stop. Forgiveness is overrated."

"She's always afraid of showing her emotions," Robin continues. "It makes her...well, let's just say she's not the greatest at expressing her love for people. Much like someone else I know."

"I hate you," Regina grumbles, gingerly lowering herself into the passenger seat.

"Exhibit A."

Robin starts the car, and Regina swallows as pressure starts to build behind her eyes. "I was so awful to her this week, Robin. I wasn't trying to be, it just...it just comes out."

He looks confused. "To your mother?"

"No, to Emma."

"Thankfully, she seems to espouse my view of forgiveness instead of yours."

She sighs. "I'm sorry I pointed a gun at your face."

"I already told you I forgive you. It wasn't you."

"It was me," Regina disagrees. "It just...it wasn't *you*."

"I know."

"And I'm sorry I ruined your shoes and broke your mirror."

"Those can both be replaced."

"I *will* replace them. I promise."

Robin shrugs. "The shoes were worn-out and needed resoling anyway, and I was never a fan of that mirror," he says with a slight chuckle. "It had a tendency to make me look older than I'd like."

"Robin Locksley, stop coddling me," Regina huffs angrily. "I'm not broken."

"This isn't coddling," he disagrees, "this is friendship, and I know you're not broken."

"Good."

"But even if you were," the idiot continues, "that's what friends are for: to help put you back together. Needing a little extra support from time to time doesn't make you weak, it makes you human, and having the courage to ask for it makes you stronger."

"Shut up," she orders. "Just...stop talking."

For once, he actually listens.

The drive is long and silent, and Regina realizes as they arrive at the hospital that she never actually took her mother's advice, and she's still in Marian's pajamas, her hair uncombed, and she's not even wearing a bra. Well, she supposes that after what happened earlier today, there's not much left to embarrass her.

Her heart beats more quickly the closer they get to the room. She can hear the beeping of monitors through the other patients' doors, and the thought of seeing Emma hooked up to all of those machines makes her feel like her knees are about to give out again. She's about to start her breathing exercises when she's suddenly almost tackled to the ground by a powerful hug.

"Regina, you're okay!" the person says, squeezing her tightly as her spine stiffens and her breathing becomes more and more shallow. It's a small person, brown hair -

"Henry?" she gasps. Who else could it be?

"You weren't here, and no one would tell me where you were!" he exclaims. "I thought you were shot, too."

"Oh, Henry," Regina breathes, slowly relaxing into his embrace, "I'm right here. How's your mom?"

"You must be Regina," a man who vaguely resembles Henry says as he exits Emma's room. He must be Neal. "Em's doing alright – a little out of it from the concussion, but they were able to remove the bullet from her shoulder, and doctors said it missed all the important nerve endings."

Regina lets out the breath she didn't know she was holding in. "That's very good," she says, relieved.

"Yeah, she'll be fine. She just likes to scare people," Henry says bravely (from the look in his eyes, though, it's clear he'd been pretty scared). "Do you want to see her?"

"I..."

That's why she's here, isn't it?

So why is she suddenly overcome with dread?

"She's been asking about you," Neal says. "I think she'd be really excited to see you, if you're up for it."

"Yes, of course," Regina murmurs, clearing her throat and straightening her shoulders.

Locksley looks worried. "Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes, Robin, I am sure!" Regina says angrily before striding into the room.

Emma, thankfully, isn't hooked up to any machines. There's a sling on one arm and an IV line in the other, but aside from looking exhausted, she seems to be all in one piece.

"Hey, partner," she says, smiling brightly when she sees Regina.

"Emma," Regina says with a stiff nod. "How are you feeling?"

Emma considers for a moment before replying, "Not bad. I feel like everything's a few beats slower than normal, but overall, I'm okay. Whoever invented morphine is a god. I hope they got a medal."

She should be happy.

The fact that Emma is in good spirits and on the road to recovery should make her ecstatic.

Instead, it infuriates her.

"Detective Swan, you can never do that again," she snaps.

"Can't do what?" Emma asks, furrowing her brow in confusion.

"You can't...you can't take a bullet for me!" Regina cries. "You can't just risk your life like that! There are people...people who need you! Henry! He could have lost his mother today! He...Emma, what the hell were you thinking?"

"Okay," Emma says slowly, "first of all, I did not take a bullet for you. I...I mean, my memory of the shooting is a little shaky, but I think I remember pushing you out of the way of one bullet, and then a different one hit me."

"Not the point."

"No, it's not. Even if I had 'taken a bullet for you' – which, by the way, I would absolutely do – I just got hit in the shoulder. It's not life-threatening or anything. That gun was aimed at your head."

"You fucking idiot, of course it's life-threatening!" Regina is practically screaming now. "Do you have any idea how much blood you lost? If the angle had been a little different, if the ambulance hadn't come so quickly..."

She has to stop – she's starting to feel faint. *In. Out.* She draws in thick, ragged breaths one by one and tries to calm down because this rage is not helping anything.

"Well, none of that stuff happened, and I'm fine," Emma says dismissively, "so let's just stop talking about this."

"We can't! We can't stop talking about this because...you can't do that! You can't put yourself at risk like that. I'm not worth it!"

"What?" Emma looks thoroughly bewildered. "Of course you are."

Regina shakes her head vehemently. "No. Henry needs you. I...I need you, too," she adds quietly as a solitary tear leaks out of her eye. *Not again*, she thinks. As if there hasn't been enough crying for one day. "I'm supposed to protect you."

"Yeah, we're partners. I'm supposed to protect you, too. So I did."

"Emma, no."

"Yes. I need you, too – ever think of that? Like, maybe I would be slightly upset if you died? I can't do this homicide thing without you. I need you to stick around for a while."

"No, you don't!" Regina insists, wondering why the hell the younger woman doesn't seem to understand her. "You need to stay alive."

Emma leans back against her pillow and sighs. "You're giving me a fucking headache," she mutters.

Belatedly, Regina remembers the concussion and feels horrible. "Emma, I'm sorry. I have to stop snapping at you, I...you scared me." *I'm still terrified*, she adds internally. *You have no idea how much.*

"Yeah, I was pretty damn scared too, when I saw that gun aimed for your head. I'd rather not dwell on it, though."

"Henry can't lose you," Regina says seriously. *I can't lose you.*

"He won't," Emma insists. "I'm going to be fine, as long as you stop screaming in my face. I'm supposed to rest my brain."

"I'm sorry," Regina whispers, and she flees the room. As soon as she's somewhere neither Emma nor Henry can see her, she bursts into tears.

Robin offers, once, on Saturday night, to drive Regina back to her own apartment, but the very thought of it almost brings on another panic attack, so he quickly withdraws the question. Her mother tries to insist on taking her back to Storybrooke, but Regina flatly refuses. She's not sure how she feels about this newly emotional version of her mother, and her father's hovering is even worse than Robin's. Here, at least there are plenty of places to escape to and a cute child to entertain her.

Robin informs Roland that the weekend is Auntie Regina's extended play date with him, and the little boy makes it his duty to show her a good time so she "won't cry again." They read about seven books together, visit the playground and the dog park, make a movie with his stuffed animals, and eat ice cream for every meal. By Sunday night, she thinks she feels almost human again, and Marian's pajama bottoms are starting to squeeze a little around the waist.

"I'm going to have to go back to my own apartment tomorrow," she says sadly. "And probably start a diet."

"I will have you know that we don't normally eat like this here," Robin grumbles with his mouth full of Heath Bar Crunch. They're sitting together on the sofa, two cartons of ice cream between them with a baseball game on TV (though it isn't the Red Sox, so no one is watching too intently). "I feed my boy a balanced diet."

"Thanks for letting me stay," Regina tells him. "And...thanks for everything. I probably don't say it enough."

Robin stares awkwardly into his bowl and says, "It's nothing. I mean, you'd do the same for me, right? In fact, I'm fairly certain you have."

"There was that one time," she agrees. One time immediately after Marian's death when she'd found him at the bottom of a bottle of whiskey with a gun to his own head. Until this weekend, it was probably the second scariest moment of her life. They never speak of it anymore. "But you're better now, and...well, I'm not."

"Comparisons are odious. That's what I learned in grief counseling. We all heal in our own way, on our own timeline."

"You should become a guru," she jokes.

"Nah, I don't know anything. It's all just driving forward in a snowstorm, only seeing a couple of feet ahead of you, but they say you can make it up the whole mountain that way. Hey, did you get a chance to talk to Emma today?" he asks, rapidly changing the subject.

"You and your metaphors. Yes, actually I did. She seems...in good spirits." She had spoken to her partner on the phone for about ten minutes before the other woman's attention had been occupied by her son and a few other visitors. She'd apologized for her outburst; Emma had jokingly apologized for saving her life.

"Next time I'll let you do the honors," she'd said. "We can take turns playing the hero."

"How are your shoulder and head?"

"Maybe it's all this morphine, but I'm feeling great! Let's run a whole marathon together tomorrow."

"Very funny."

"No, seriously, even with all the painkillers, my head feels a lot less foggy. I think I'm gonna heal really quickly from this," Emma had assured her. Regina had successfully forced a chuckle and pretended she wasn't still scared shitless.

"I'm glad," says Robin. "She's been a good addition to the unit. I want both of you back as soon as possible." He moves the empty ice cream containers off the couch, and Regina leans over to rest her head on his shoulder. He hesitates for a moment before lightly rubbing her upper back.

"You are the most resilient person I know, Regina Mills," he murmurs. "You're going to get through this, I promise."

On Monday morning, Robin drives Regina to the station for her appointment.

"I don't want to talk to Dr. Hopper," she says petulantly.

Robin rolls his eyes. "Do you want to go back to work soon, or not?"

Actually, she's not entirely sure about that, but since she's already stated that she does, she can't very well change her opinion now. "Yes," she grumbles. "Fine, I'll go."

"I'm proud of you," Robin says, and she groans internally and ignores him, walking quickly into the station with her head down so she doesn't have to meet the eyes of anyone who might have heard about Saturday's incident.

She knocks tentatively on Dr. Hopper's door, feeling like an idiot. "Hello?" she calls. There's no immediate response. Maybe she can leave and just-

"Regina, come in," the department shrink says warmly. He opens the door wide open and reaches out to shake her hand while his Dalmatian, Pongo, barks excitedly behind him. "He's missed you," Dr. Hopper chuckles as she bends down to scratch the dog behind the ears. "It's been a while."

"It has," Regina agrees. In her ideal world, it would have been never again, but things have a tendency not to work out the way she'd like.

"I heard about the shooting on Saturday. How is Detective Swan doing?"

"She's...she'll be fine," Regina says quietly. "She'll have a long recovery process, obviously, but the bullet missed everything major, and she says her head is already starting to feel better. I think she's lying, but..at least she's thinking clearly enough to lie, right?"

"That's great news," Archie says with a smile. "Please, have a seat. I imagine the shooting has something to do with why you're here?"

"It's related, yes."

He looks at her expectantly, and she stares down at her hands, which can't seem to stop fidgeting with the buttons of her blazer. She'd gone home briefly to change clothes, unwilling to be seen at work without the protective armor of a freshly-pressed suit, but now she wishes she was still dressed in pajamas. She wishes she was anywhere but this room; it brings back a lot of old emotions she'd rather not deal with again. Dr. Hopper wordlessly hands her a stress ball.

"I had a flashback," she admits, squeezing it tightly.

"To...White?" he asks.

Regina closes her eyes so she doesn't have to see the pity etched across his face and nods reluctantly.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

He means since her last flashback, which was five years ago (the last daytime one, anyway, which is all she really counts, because nightmares aren't going to force her off the job), but Regina clutches the ball harder and hisses, "It's been nearly eleven years! Why is this still happening?"

"These things take-"

Regina explodes as days, weeks (or, more truthfully, years) of pain and frustration come pouring out of her. "Don't tell me these things take time!" she screams at him. "Don't! Because next month is the eleventh anniversary and it still fucking feels like yesterday! I can't do this anymore; I can't live like this. I feel like I'm just waiting around for the next breakdown, and I just...I'm tired!" She draws a ragged breath and finishes by breaking into harsh, convulsing sobs. "Archie, I'm just so tired."

"You were doing much better, though, for a while. Weren't you?" he asks, reaching out hesitantly to take her hand. She lets him. "At least, you haven't come to see me for a couple of years, now."

She cries for a few more minutes before she's able to answer. "I was handling it." She swallows she lump in her throat and corrects, "I thought I was handling it."

"Can you tell me about your flashback?" he asks. "Was it after the shooting?"

"At the hospital. I'm pretty sure they wanted to admit me to a psych ward, but Locksley talked them out of it. Said I had to see you, instead."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Which part of it?"

"Any of them. All of them. Whatever you want to talk about."

Regina sighs. "It was embarrassing. I broke down in front of my entire squad – well, besides Emma, I suppose. I almost shot Locksley."

"But you didn't shoot him. You were able to come out of it before that happened."

"Not on my own."

"You don't always have to do everything on your own," Archie counters. "There are people willing to support you; you should let them."

"Sometimes I wish they would just let me give up," Regina whispers.

Archie squeezes her hand and shakes his head. "You're not giving up," he tells her. "You've fought too long and too hard to let that happen, and you're still fighting now. You're here: you're trying to get better."

"I don't know if that's possible," she says dully.

"Regina..."

"I've done *everything*!" she cries. "Every single thing you and everyone else told me to do. Facing my attacker in court – I did that. I went to that stupid grief support group. New furniture, new locks, trying to resume old hobbies, hours and hours of therapy...I've done all of it and I'm still not better if one little thing can bring me back to square one!"

"You're not back to square one," Dr. Hopper argues. "I know that's how you feel after Saturday, with the flashback making everything fresh in your mind again, but you're absolutely not back to square one. Do you remember how you were eleven years ago?"

"I try not to," she sniffles.

"Square one Regina would never have been able to verbalize her emotions the way that you just did. Square one Regina wouldn't even have been able to get dressed and put on makeup and walk into my office on her own. She wouldn't be allowing me to hold her hand right now. We wouldn't be talking realistically about how soon she can return to work; we would be talking about how to help her get out of bed in the morning. No matter how awful you feel right now, Regina, you can't ignore all the progress you've made. It's been eleven years of effort, and you've earned every bit of it."

"Why isn't it enough?" Regina mumbles through her tears, holding tightly to his hand like a lifeline. "Why is it never enough?"

With his free hand, he passes her a box of tissues, and he waits for her to blow her nose before saying sadly, "Because you went through something that no human being should ever have to face, and it's unrealistic to believe that experience wouldn't change you. That doesn't mean that you can't still have a happy and fulfilling life, but you're sometimes going to have bad moments. Everyone does. Yours might be worse than others', but they don't have to define you. You just have to accept them, and accept yourself for having them, and then focus on the good ones."

"Lately, everything feels like a bad moment."

He runs his thumb along her knuckles in a way that reminds her of Daniel in the nicest way and asks softly, "Do you want to tell me about the flashback?"

Regina sighs and shakes her head. "It was the same as all the others. White...White did his thing, and I let him."

"You didn't *let* him," Archie disagrees. Regina shrugs. They've had this same argument dozens of times over the past decade; his opinion has never changed, and neither has hers. "Regina, you have to stop blaming yourself for what White did. If there's one thing I can identify that's getting in the way of your healing, it's that. There is only one person guilty for what happened that night, and it's Leopold White. There was nothing you could have done that would have made the outcome any different."

"But he wouldn't have tried to come after us if it wasn't for my job!"

"Maybe not," Archie concedes, "but he would have gone after other women, other families. He *did* go after other women; that's why you were investigating him in the first place. And in the end, you stopped him. He's locked away now. Thanks to you, he hasn't killed anyone else since that night, and that's something you should be very proud of."

"I wish I had killed him," she mutters under her breath. Not that, in the end, killing him would have made her feel any better. Neither does taking out all of her anger on his daughter. Nothing does, and part of her wishes that he had killed her, instead.

"You did give him a spine injury that's probably more painful than instantaneous death," the therapist reminds her.

Regina gapes at him. "Are you supposed to be encouraging my vengeful thoughts?"

"Well, it made you stop crying," he says lightly. "While I don't think revenge is particularly healthy, I think it's a step in the right direction for you to wish pain on him, rather than yourself."

"I don't want to talk about White anymore," Regina whispers. "I can't."

"Okay." Archie squeezes her hand and gives her a small smile. "What about the shooting? It seems like that was the event that triggered your flashback? Or am I completely off-base?"

"I don't see why," she says bitterly. "I'm a homicide detective. I've seen plenty of...*violence* since then and it...I mean, it's affected me, obviously. It affects everyone but...it wasn't like this."

"So, what do you think was different this time?"

Regina feels her chest start to constrict, and her hands tremble uncontrollably in her lap as she starts to remember the shooting. "Breathing through the diaphragm," he reminds her, gently coaxing her palm to rest at the top of her abdomen. "Push out against your hand...that's it. Good."

Regina squeezes her eyes shut and tries to breathe. "Emma," she finally chokes out. "Emma was different."

"Your partner was badly injured."

Lips pressed tightly together, Regina nods.

"Do you want to tell me more?"

"There was blood – there was so much blood. It...I tried to stop the bleeding, but it just kept coming out and...and I thought she wasn't going to make it."

"I see. What happened? I mean, I heard a little on the news, and from Locksley, but in your words..."

"We were approaching a suspect, and he started firing at us. There was a bullet...it was aimed at my head. She pushed me out of the way, and then...I didn't see exactly what happened. There was more shooting, and then she went down."

Archie nods.

"I don't...I know that it wasn't my fault," Regina says softly. "I know that the bullet aimed at me wasn't the same one that hit her...she told me that. I just...it was like when..."

"When Daniel died?" Archie supplies when she's been silent for almost a minute.

Regina nods as her eyes fill with tears once again. "I don't want anyone else I love to die protecting me!" she cries out. "I would rather die than lose someone else!" Then she realizes what she's just said and claps a hand over her mouth in surprise.

"Anyone else you *love*? Do you...do you want to talk more about that?"

Regina wonders if it's possible to just poof out of a room. There are ways to get herself allowed back on the job sooner, but admitting her deeply concealed feelings for her partner was not one of them.

"I don't know."

"Do you love Emma?"

"I don't know."

"She's your partner," he says diplomatically. "Obviously, a strong bond is going to develop; that's kind of the point. And she's the only other woman in the unit, it makes sense that the two of you would become close-"

"No," Regina interrupts.

"No?"

If she's going to open up, she might as well open all the way. "Yes, she's my partner, but it's more than that. I...I care very deeply about her."

"You mean romantically?"

"Maybe."

Dr. Hopper just nods.

"You have nothing to say about that?" Regina challenges. "That's a first."

"What would you like me to say?"

"You're supposed to tell me that it's unprofessional and I can't feel that way about her, and then you're supposed to help me get over it before it leads to disaster...if it hasn't already."

"I'm a therapist, Regina; I don't work for Internal Affairs. It's not my place to tell you whether your feelings are professional or not."

"Well, they aren't. I already know that."

"It *is* my job," he continues, pretending he hadn't heard her last remark, "to tell you whether your feelings are helping or hurting your healing process."

"Okay, so tell me," she demands. "And then help me get rid of them, because I can't...I can't feel this way about her."

"Why not?"

"Have you not been listening to me? Because it's inappropriate! I need to get over it and get back to my life."

"Right, because that life was working really well for you," he says with a tired sigh (When has he ever been this sarcastic before?), and she glares. "Feelings don't work that way, Regina. They don't just go away. You can bury them deep inside you, but they're just going to pop back up when it's least convenient. I think, by now, you should know that better than anyone."

"Then what do you suggest I do?"

"You...you should let yourself feel whatever it is that Emma makes you feel. Especially if she makes you happy."

"She does," Regina admits. "When she's not getting shot, she makes me very happy."

"Tell me about that," Archie encourages. He laces his fingers together with hers and gives her a soft smile. "Tell me about how she makes you happy."

"I...I don't know. She just does," Regina fumbles. "She's very...she's kind. To everyone. And she's...well, she's not really that funny, but she thinks she is, and that's...it's kind of adorable. She's not afraid to laugh at herself. And she's just so genuine; everything about her is real and sincere. I think that's - above all, that's what I love about her."

"You're smiling," Archie observes, "when you talk about her."

Regina reaches up to feel her face and realizes that she is, in fact, smiling broadly. "She makes me smile...very often. Her son does, too. He's so sweet and creative, and just...enthusiastic about everything. Having both of them in my life, even for such a short time, has been such a blessing."

"Regina, do you want to know the last time I saw you smile like this?" Archie asks. "Because the answer is never."

"I think they actually have helped me heal somewhat," she admits. "I...I told Emma about White. Just a little bit, not everything, but...she was very supportive, and that same day, I rode a horse with her son. It was

the first time, and I felt truly happy with him. I haven't felt that way in so long."

"Regina, that's wonderful."

"It is," she agrees, "but-"

"No, there is no 'but.' That's wonderful!"

"But I *can't* feel this way about her. She's my partner! We work together nearly every minute of the day. I can't go through the day harboring these feelings!"

"Maybe you don't have to hide it," Hopper suggests. "You could always tell her how you feel."

"That would only make it worse," Regina mumbles.

"Why?"

"I already told you!" she exclaims impatiently.

"Because you're partners? But what if you weren't?"

"What do you mean?" she asks frantically, starting to panic. "What are you talking about?"

"Breathe, Regina. It's just a hypothetical situation. *If* you weren't partners, would you tell her how you feel?"

"No."

"You seem very certain of that answer."

"I don't want to ruin what we have. Our friendship. I – if she doesn't feel the same way..."

"But what if she did?"

"Whose side are you on?" Regina demands.

"Yours, although I wasn't aware there were sides to be chosen."

"Then why are you encouraging me to do something that could cause me to lose my career?"

"Your career that, in your own words, is the reason you lost everything?" Regina scowls. "I just want you to answer one question, Regina. You say that you want to get better, to be happy again. Isn't that right?"

"I do," she insists tearfully. "I want that more than anything."

"And here is an opportunity for you find that happiness, to help heal your heart, and your response is to run in the opposite direction. Why is that?"

"You're the therapist. You tell me."

"Regina..."

"I don't need to pursue a romantic relationship with Emma to be happy. Our friendship already makes me happy. We just established that."

"Maybe," he allows, "but it also seems like hiding your feelings for her is causing you a lot of stress."

"I can handle my stress." What she can't handle is the possibility of losing Emma just like the last person she cared for this way.

He's decent enough not to contradict her. "Okay, then," he sighs, checking his watch. "I think we made a lot of progress today."

"So when can I go back to work?"

"That remains to be seen. Let's set up another appointment a week from now and see how you're doing."

"A week?" Regina demands. Her voice squeaks and for a second she's afraid she's going to cry again, but she keeps it in.

"This is a process, Regina. You know that. Obviously, if there's an emergency, or you want to talk before then, you can call whenever you want. But I think that resuming our weekly sessions for a while will be good for you, even after you're back at work."

"Fine. Do I have homework?" she growls, feeling for a moment like a frustrated high school student instead of an adult.

"I'd like you to start journaling again-"

"Archie, I don't-"

"You didn't let me finish. Not about the flashbacks, unless you want to, because we're both hoping you don't have another one for a while, and we agreed that didn't help, anyway. No, I want you to write about your good moments. Every time you smile: when, and why."

"Fine," she huffs, "anything else?"

"Just...take care of yourself. Spend time with people who make you feel safe. The usual."

Regina nods slowly. She supposes she can try to do that. She thinks about Emma and how spending time with her could certainly be a good moment if she can just manage to control her emotions for once. She stands and she's about to walk out of the room when she suddenly turns and says, "Archie, do you think...if I told her how I feel, and she doesn't feel the same way, do you think she'd forgive me?"

"I can't speak for Detective Swan – I've never even met her – but I don't think that love is anything that requires forgiveness. Anyway," he jokes, "you mentioned she had a head injury? She might not even remember it five minutes later, anyway."

Regina almost laughs. "Thanks, Archie."

Regina pokes her head into Emma's hospital room. She's unsure if she wants to confess her feelings to her partner or not, but at the very least, she wants to apologize for the rudeness of her attempts to conceal them. And, truthfully, what would it harm if Emma knew? The younger woman must have had at least one unrequited crush in her life; she'd probably understand.

But she realizes as soon as the enters that she had conveniently forgotten one important fact: Henry and Neal are still here; they're not returning to New York until tonight. And they're currently arguing loudly over Emma's very confused head.

"Henry, you have to go to school," Neal says exasperatedly.

"It's the last week," Henry protests. "We're just going to have a party and clean out all our old projects. I won't learn anything, and they'll let me pass fourth grade no matter what!"

"We still have to go back to New York. I can't take any more time off this month."

"Then let me stay by myself and take care of Mom!"

"Henry," Neal says with a heavy sigh, "you're ten. You're awesome, but you're not old enough to take care of Mom all by yourself, and she can't take care of you right now. She needs time to heal. I promise I'll bring you back to see her next weekend."

Henry looks like he's about to cry, and Regina clears her throat to alert them to her presence. "Hello, everyone. What seems to be the problem?" she asks.

"Regina!" Henry exclaims, immediately enveloping her in a desperate hug. "Tell my dad that I have to stay in Boston and take care of my mom. She needs me. I don't need school."

"Henry, I...I can't make that decision," Regina says helplessly. He'd seemed in such high spirits the last time she'd spoken to him, but the trauma of almost losing his mother is clearly catching up to him, and her heart aches. "That's...it's your parents' choice."

"Kid," Emma pipes up, "I'm gonna be fine. You go to New York and enjoy your class party, and...I'm gonna be fine." She seems on the verge of tears, like she doesn't want him to leave at all, and the trauma of the last few days is making it much harder for her to be strong.

"So, what is our main problem?" Regina asks. "Are you worried about Henry missing school, or...what?"

"The problem is that Henry is only ten years old, and, responsible as he is for his age, he's not responsible enough to be a caregiver for his *mother*," Neal explains slowly. "And, in her current condition, she might not be able to care for him, either. She needs to focus on taking care of herself."

Emma and Henry are both crying at this point, and Neal himself doesn't look particularly happy about the decision he's had to make. Regina can't take it, and the most and least brilliant idea she's ever had suddenly pops into her head.

"What if," she suggests tentatively, "there was someone there to take care of both of them, so they could be together."

Henry stops crying, and Neal and Emma both stare at her in disbelief, though probably for different reasons. "Are you volunteering?" Neal asks skeptically.

"I...yes," Regina answers. "I'm on leave for the next couple of weeks; I have plenty of time on my hands. And, well, you saved my life; it's the least I can do."

"Are...are you sure that's okay?" asks Emma.

"Yes," Regina states with much more confidence than she feels.

Henry is jumping up and down and hugging her tightly and she feels slightly faint, and Neal raises his eyebrows and says, "Alright, then."

As Regina leaves the hospital to grab some clothes from her apartment – she's made plans with Neal to pick Emma and Henry up from the hospital in a few hours after Emma is discharged and stay with them at Emma's place for the next week or so – she calls Locksley at the station to tell him her plan.

"You'll be pleased to know that I've found a way to keep myself busy while you prevent me from doing my job."

"Are you out of your mind?" he asks after she explains it.

"Do you need to redo your sensitivity training?" she demands.

Robin groans. "Regina, have you never heard the expression 'put on your own oxygen mask first'?"

"I'm perfectly oxygenated."

She hangs up the phone and briefly considers that he may be right, but she dismisses that thought almost as soon as it enters her mind. Because, as much as Emma Swan takes her breath away, she's also the one who ends up helping her breathe again, and she's never going to take that gift

for granted again. Emma is the tree that provides her oxygen, the lone surviving sapling in a completely leveled forest, and she needs to be protected and nurtured at all costs.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for everything, all you lovely people!

Disclaimer: Along with everything else, I also do not own Le Petit Prince. That is the work of the incomparable Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (and whoever translated it into English). Any quotes from that work will be in italics in case you don't immediately recognize them. And if you don't, please go read that book before you do anything else. It will change your life.

"I don't need a fucking wheelchair," Emma growls.

"Language, Detective Swan," Regina lightly scolds her partner, putting her hands over Henry's ears as Neal helps the nurses lower Emma into a wheelchair to leave the hospital. "There are impressionable young ears in the room."

Henry rolls his eyes and points out, "I'm ten years old, not ten months. And anyway, you do need a 'fucking wheelchair.' You almost fell on your face when you got up to go to the bathroom.

"Maybe I can ask the hospital staff if we can borrow one for the apartment," Regina muses.

"No!" Emma exclaims immediately. "There will be no wheelchairs at the apartment; I'm fine. If you try anything like that, this entire arrangement is off."

"I made this arrangement," Regina snaps, "and I'll do as I see fit."

"You won't do that," Emma argues. "You wouldn't. I mean, you'd do a lot of things, but if you care about my mental health at all, you wouldn't do that."

"Maybe I would. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

Henry raises his eyebrows curiously and turns to Neal. "What's going on?" he whispers. "Are they flirting?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, kid," his father says with an amused shake of his head.

"Absolutely not," Regina exclaims at the same time that Emma shrugs her shoulders with a goofy smile.

Henry laughs.

"Your mother's had a head injury, and she's got large amounts of painkillers in her system right now," Regina tells him with a forced smile. "Take everything she says over the next week or so with a grain of salt."

"Hey!" Emma protests.

"Do not 'hey' me, Detective Swan. I promised to take care of you and Henry, and I will do so, but you should remember that my patience is not infinite."

"Right," Emma mutters sarcastically. "So sorry, Detective Mills. I'll try not to test your patience."

Regina softens. "It's alright, dear. I know you can't help it. Now, let's get you out of this hospital."

"Sounds great," Emma says with a soft smile which quickly changes to a grimace as Regina starts to push her chair out the door. She motions for Neal and Henry to walk on either side of her so that no curious passerby can see her embarrassment.

"It's okay, Mom," Henry reassures her. "It's just hospital policy, remember? So they don't get sued if you trip on your way out the door. That's what you told me a long time ago."

Emma sighs. Yes, it is. But it's not easy to reassure herself that it's 'just hospital policy' when she knows the likelihood of tripping and falling flat on her face is actually very high. It's bad enough to appear vulnerable in front of her son; to know that she actually *is* makes it worse.

Henry and Neal wait with her on the curb while Regina brings the car around. Neal is lecturing Henry on the importance of good behavior.

"Remember that Regina is doing you and Mom a huge favor. If there's anything you can help her with, help. If she asks you to do something, do it. Mom's still in charge, but Regina is, too. Whatever rules she makes, you have to follow them."

"Regina's cool," Henry argues. "She's not gonna make a bunch of stupid rules for me."

"Maybe not, but if she does, you have to listen to her. Got it?"

"Got it," Henry replies with a groan.

"She'll probably make you eat vegetables and practice your handwriting," Emma teases. "At least, that's what she does to me at work."

"This'll be good for you, kid." Neal claps a hand on his son's shoulder and gives him a tight squeeze. "You're going to learn all about flexibility."

Henry sighs and rolls his eyes. "You two are annoying when you agree with each other."

"Well, we agree that we both love you. I hope that's not annoying," Neal laughs. Emma nods along with him, feeling her eyes start to tear up a little. She's not sure if it's the concussion or the painkillers, but she's been way too emotional over the past couple of days.

"Mutual mushiness, gross. Where is Regina?"

Neal raises an eyebrow. "Why, exactly, do you think this woman is your personal savior?" he questions, more curious than anything else.

"She's not my personal savior," Henry says, shrugging dismissively. "She's just awesome."

"She is," Emma agrees.

She's about to add something about Regina's mushiness level that's probably not appropriate to share when she's saved from her sudden lack of a filter by the woman herself pulling up at the curb.

Regina quickly opens the doors and pushes the mountain of grocery bags in the back seat aside, so Henry can sit, before she reaches out to help Emma stand, propping the blonde up by her waist and elbow.

"I can stand by myself," Emma snaps, but her partner ignores her protests.

"Watch your step," she advises as they approach the edge of the sidewalk. Emma rolls her eyes and grudgingly allows Regina to carefully lower her into the vehicle, one hand protecting her head from the door. She knows from Locksley and the other detectives who came to visit her in the hospital that Regina had taken the shooting hard, and she's seen over the years that losing a partner is something a cop might never quite recover from, so she's determined to tolerate a bit of smothering, for now.

And, truth be told, she's never had someone so determined to take care of her before. She supposes she might as well enjoy it.

"Henry should be able to tell you where everything is, if Emma can't," Neal is explaining to Regina. "And I know I'm four hours away, but if there are any issues with him, or with either of them-"

"I have your number," Regina assures him. "We'll see you next weekend, then?"

Neal gives Henry a quick kiss and waves to Emma before beginning his trek back to the parking garage and then New York.

Emma falls asleep the second Regina starts the car, and she doesn't wake up until they pull up to her building.

"Wow, I'm really out of it," she mumbles. She's so out of it that she doesn't utter a word of protest as Regina and Henry each support one side and help her walk up the stairs, and she barely even notices when they lower her onto her bed and Regina pulls the blankets up to her chin and whispers, "Sweet dreams."

The last thing she hears before she drifts off is Henry suggesting that they order pizza and Regina saying something about the importance of vegetables. She falls asleep with a smile on her face.

Emma's couch is about halfway between the break room's and her own on the scale of comfort, Regina thinks as she tosses and turns. It's a bit worse than Robin's – the fabric is slightly scratchy – but that isn't the

reason she can't sleep. No, she can't sleep because Emma is in the next room, and as close as that is, it's somehow not close enough.

She had hoped that admitting her feelings to Archie would help alleviate them, that sharing her burden would somehow lighten the load. It had worked with grief; it had worked with shame.

But with love, it's had the opposite effect. Her feelings have only gotten stronger.

She was a fool to think she'd be able to live in close quarters with Emma and not eventually address them.

But she won't be addressing them tonight, she thinks as she stands up and stretches her back, which is sore from the tension she's been holding in her shoulders all day. She really needs to go for a run; it's been four days, and the lack of endorphins is taking its toll on both her body and her mind. She needs the release.

She feels her feet moving, almost against her will, and they're taking her to the door of Emma's bedroom. The younger woman's face looks pale in the moonlight, and a light breeze is blowing in through the cracked window, blowing strands of silky blonde hair up toward the ceiling. Regina watches for a moment, mesmerized, drawn closer as her body is overwhelmed by the urge to run her fingers through it.

Her arm is reaching out when she suddenly stops herself with a slight gasp.

This is so inappropriate it's not even funny.

Emma is her partner, her coworker. She's too young and she's not interested and she's not even *awake*. Regina has absolutely no business touching her, even just her hair.

Shaking her head vigorously, to snap herself out of whatever *this* is, Regina strides over to the window and closes and locks it. *What the hell was Emma thinking?* Just to be safe, she starts making her way around the apartment, checking each and every window and tutting with dismay when she discovers that over half of them are unlocked. In the morning, or perhaps in several mornings when Emma's concussion symptoms have lessened and she'll remember every detail, she's going to get a long lecture about home security. Regina is already composing it in her head when she's distracted by the sound of soft whimpers, so quiet she can just barely hear them.

They're coming from Henry's room.

For a moment, she freezes, wondering what she should do about it. He obviously needs comfort, but she's not his mother; she barely knows him. His mother is in the next bedroom over, but she needs to rest, and she's in no place to comfort him. His father is in New York. Which leaves...Regina. Who has little experience dealing with other people's nightmares, particularly children's.

Still, she swore to protect and serve both of her charges, and that's what she's going to do.

Hesitantly, she pokes her head into his room, and she sees him sitting up in bed, clutching an old and worn teddy bear to his chest, face buried in its fur to muffle his cries.

"Henry?" she whispers. "Is everything alright?"

He looks up with watery eyes and shakes his head. "I'm sorry if I woke you up."

"You didn't," she quickly reassures him. Softly making her way over to the bed, she asks, "Did you have a nightmare?"

"Maybe." He quickly deposits the teddy bear next to him and adds, "But I'm fine."

Regina tries to channel Archie. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asks.

"I'm not a baby," he protests, drawing himself up in a show of false bravado that's betrayed by the way his voice cracks. "I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can," Regina says carefully, "but that doesn't mean you have to." He considers. "May I sit with you?" she asks.

Henry nods and moves slightly to the side to make room for her.

"Nightmares are nothing to be ashamed of," she continues, quoting the same words the therapist has said to her multiple times but she's never quite believed. "They're how our minds deal with things that are too scary to think about during the day."

"Well, I never have nightmares," Henry mutters. "I'm too old to have them."

Regina sighs. "I don't think that's possible."

"Did you have one, too?" Henry asks, ears perking with interest.

"Not tonight, but...far more often than I'd like. And I'm much older than you."

He nods in understanding. "You must see a lot of scary stuff at work."

"I do," Regina admits quietly. "And what about you?"

"I don't see anything scary, except..." his voice trails off as he casts a quick glance in the direction of Emma's room.

"Your mother's injury must have been very frightening."

"I was at a sleepover, at my friend Nick's house," Henry recalls. "My dad wasn't supposed to come get me until noon, but then he showed up when we were about to eat breakfast and just said we had to go to Boston right away, but he wouldn't tell me why and he looked like he was about to cry. And...I knew it had to do with Mom, and it must have been bad because my parents never cry in front of me...until now, I guess."

Regina nods, remembering the experience of witnessing her own mother almost cry for the first time. She's forty-three, and she's still shaken by it. "I'm sure that was difficult for you to see."

"I guess," Henry says with a shrug. "I don't mind if they show me how they feel – I mean, it's better than lying – but it was scary because I didn't know why. He didn't tell me until your lieutenant called again and said that she was out of surgery and going to be okay."

"She *is* going to be okay," Regina says soothingly. "She's going to bounce right back from this; she's already starting to."

"I know." Henry looks down and chews at his thumbnail. "But I just keep thinking about her getting shot, and how she could have died, and...and then I can't sleep."

He starts sniffling again, and Regina immediately wraps him in her arms. "Oh, Henry," she murmurs, "I know."

Henry leans against her, pressing his face against her chest, and fights back tears. "I don't want to lose my mom."

"You won't. She survived; we wear those fancy bulletproof vests for a reason, you know. She's still alive and well in the next room, and she's not going to leave you anytime soon. In fact, I'm personally going to make sure she's more careful in the future."

He responds with a whimper and more tears.

"We can check on her right now, if you want. Would that make you feel better?"

Henry nods, so Regina helps him out of bed and they walk slowly and clumsily to Emma's door together. He's clinging tightly to her waist, his body nearly flush against hers, bringing with it a terrifying burden of responsibility, but one that she feels no desire to lessen.

"See, look," Regina whispers, "her chest is moving up and down. That means she's breathing."

Henry looks; he looks long and hard and finally, slowly, he exhales.

"She's fine," he says. His nose nuzzles against Regina's shoulder and he repeats, "She's fine."

"She is," Regina agrees, rubbing soothing circles on his back and using her other hand to hold the back of his head like he's an infant.

Henry gazes up at her with admiration and says, "Regina, I'm glad my mom has you to protect her."

Regina squeezes her eyes shut. She doesn't deserve to have him look at her like that. If he knew...well, anyway, she can't think about any of that right now. It's not as if she's going to act on her feelings for his mother, anyway.

"Now let's see about getting you some sleep," she suggests, gently leading him out of the room so they don't wake Emma. "What do your parents usually do to make you feel better when you have a nightmare?"

Henry shrugs, and Regina's eyes dart around the room helplessly because she really doesn't have any suggestions. "I haven't had a lot of nightmares," Henry admits. "Not since I was really little."

"Okay," Regina says slowly, racking her brain for anything that's comforted her over the years. There's not much. "I've found that drinking tea sometimes helps. Do you like tea?"

He wrinkles his nose. "I like cocoa."

"Then I'll make you some cocoa. And...distraction. Watching TV might wake your mom, but you like to read, right?"

Henry nods. The smile she's much more familiar with is already returning to his face.

"Alright, you pick a book to read while I start this cocoa."

Regina shakily exhales as Henry disappears into his room. She'd seen well over a hundred books in there; hopefully he'll be searching for a long time, or at least long enough for her to get her emotions sorted out.

She brings a pot of water to boil on the stove and is about to add the cocoa mix when Henry reappears at her side, clutching a small book. "I got this for my birthday," he explains, "but I haven't read it yet."

"Perfect."

"Oh, good, the cocoa's almost ready. I'll get the whipped cream and cinnamon."

"Cinnamon?" Regina asks curiously.

"It makes it taste so much better. You should try it," he says, grabbing two mugs from the cabinet. "My mom likes it with cinnamon, too."

"Alright, then."

Once their cocoas are prepared, complete with heaping amounts of whipped cream, Regina takes both mugs into the living room and sits down carefully next to Henry on the couch. "Your mother doesn't mind if you eat in here, does she?"

Henry snorts. "Come on, you know her. Does she really seem like she would care about that?"

"I don't know," Regina answers honestly. "Probably not, but...this is her home. I don't want to..."

"Well, even if she did care, it's not like she would get mad at *you*. And she probably wouldn't get mad at me, either, actually. She's been much more of a pushover since I've started living with my dad fulltime."

"She misses you."

"I know. I miss her, too, but we're getting better, I think. Or we were," he adds worriedly. After a brief pause, he shakes his head and abruptly asks, "Are you going to try the cocoa?"

She blows lightly on it before taking a sip. It tastes excessively sweet and fattening and exactly like something Emma would like. She's surprised to find it's something she likes, too. "This is delicious," she tells Henry. "The cinnamon is a nice touch."

"Apparently, a kid in one of my mom's old foster homes pranked her and told her a cinnamon stick was an edible straw, so she tried to use it to drink her cocoa," he laughs quietly. "But then she ended up really liking the taste."

Regina smiles at the thought of Emma as a gullible little girl, then frowns at the thought of that sweet, innocent child being passed from home to home and never receiving the unconditional love she deserved.

"So, how should we approach this?" she asks Henry, gesturing to the book in his hands. "Would you like me to read to you?"

"I'm too old for that," he protests, though he looks extremely reluctant.

"I won't tell anyone."

Henry hesitates. "Is this like how you're never too old for nightmares? Do you still like it when people read to you?"

"I don't know," Regina answers. "No one's offered to read to me for quite some time."

"We could take turns," Henry suggests. "You read one page to me; I'll read one to you."

Regina nods as her eyes fill with tears. She places her mug on the coffee table and *The Little Prince* on her lap as Henry leans lightly against her shoulder, and she begins reading.

"Once when I was six years old I saw a magnificent picture in a book, called True Stories from Nature, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor in the act of swallowing an animal."

Both Regina and Henry are instantly drawn into the story of an airplane pilot who meets a strange little boy from another planet while wandering through the Sahara Desert.

They trade off, page by page, for almost an hour, until Henry's eyes slowly start to flutter shut.

"To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world..." Henry finishes, and then yawns. "I think I have to stop," he admits.

"Would you like me to continue reading to you?"

He nods sleepily and curls up like a cat, resting his head on her lap, and Regina absentmindedly rubs his back as she continues reading about the little prince and the fox and a garden full of roses, too immersed in the story to notice that he's drifted off.

Henry snores softly and Regina chuckles as she closes the book. "Goodnight, little prince," she whispers, leaning down to kiss his head. Then she closes her own eyes and drifts off into an easy slumber, dreaming of deserts and wheat fields and roses.

It's been three days.

Three days since Emma got out of the hospital, three days since Regina came to stay with her and Henry, and three days since Emma's had any freedom in her own home.

It's been three days of Regina rushing to her side to help every time she tries to stand up; of Regina cutting up her food into small pieces and sorting out the pills she's taking into little cups; of Regina standing outside the bathroom door when she's in the shower, waiting for a crash; three days of Regina closing the window "for her safety" every time she opens it to get some air at night.

It was fine at first, maybe even nice. For an orphan who had always been expected to take care of herself, no matter how she felt, it was amazing to have someone whose sole function in life seemed to be to ensure her safety and comfort. And anyway, she had pretty much felt like crap, so she hadn't had the energy or motivation to complain.

But her head is clearer now, her body stronger, and when Regina is under her elbow one-and-a-half seconds after she walks into the living room on the fourth morning, she snaps.

"Don't you have something better to do?" she growls at her partner. "I can walk twenty feet by myself."

Regina doesn't reply until Emma has been safely deposited on the sofa. "I promised I would take care of you and Henry," she says shortly. "And that's what I intend to do."

"And you are," Emma allows. "And I don't want you to think I don't appreciate everything you're doing. But you might be going a little overboard. I mean, just...I'm not an invalid."

"No, but you've had some very serious injuries, and you can't just pretend they don't matter."

"I'm not pretending they don't matter! And, like I said, I'm grateful that you're taking care of me – of us – but, there's a line, you know? There's a difference between cooking dinner and cutting my food for me. I can do that myself. In fact, I could probably even help with dinner, if you let me!"

Regina purses her lips and glares.

Emma groans, running the fingers of her good arm through her hair. "Fine, keep infantilizing me. Whatever you want to do," she says tiredly. She quickly glances out the window at the pink rays of sunrise decorating the sky and frowns. "Why aren't you out running?"

"Why would I be?"

"It's morning. You go running every morning, unless you're sick or injured or there's a disaster, and none of those conditions apply right now. You like to see the sunrise. Come on, I listen when you speak; I remember these things. So why aren't you running right now?"

"I'm taking care of you," Regina mutters, looking away.

"Henry and I are capable of taking care of ourselves for a couple of hours. I just assumed you were going out while we were sleeping – don't tell me you've been cooped up in here with me the whole time."

"Fine, I won't tell you that."

That explains a lot, Emma thinks.

"Regina, I didn't – look, what you're doing for us is really nice, but, like...take care of yourself, too! Neither of us is going to suddenly drop dead if you go out for some fresh air and get your endorphins on. Seriously, go! It'll be good for your mental health."

What was meant to sound understanding and encouraging apparently came across as the exact opposite, because Regina's face instantly pales. "What are you implying about my mental health?" she snaps.

"I...nothing! Just, you know, running is good for it? Becoming my personal nurse is apparently bad for it?"

Regina's complexion has gone from white to red to purple in a matter of seconds, and Emma is slightly terrified.

"Did you ever stop to think that the fact that you need a personal nurse in the first place might be the problem?" she demands. "Have you considered for even a second that seeing you with serious injuries might be slightly traumatic for the people around you?"

"I...Regina, listen-"

"No, you listen!" Regina hisses furiously. "You don't get to speak to me about my mental health. Or, for that matter, your son's! Did you know he's been having nightmares for the last week? That he's terrified because you could have died? Did you even think about him before you threw yourself in front of a bullet?"

"For the last time, Regina, I did not throw myself in front of any bullets-
"

"Your blood was all over my hands, Emma! You...I kept telling you to wake up, and you wouldn't!"

"Yes, it's called a concussion. I was unconscious, but I'm awake now."

"Yes, well, I didn't know that at the time, did I?"

"I..." Emma closes her eyes and shakes her head. This is all too much, and it's all making her a little dizzy and sore. *What the hell happened after the shooting?* she wonders. "You know what? Forget it," she sighs. "Just...thank you for taking care of me. You're doing a great job; I was just trying to make your life easier by pointing out that I don't need help with every single daily task. You don't need to help me walk from the couch to the bathroom; you don't need to get every little thing for me; you don't need to watch me sleep or close my window every night. Okay? You're allowed to, like, give both of us some space."

"Fine," Regina spits out.

"Fine?"

"Yes, Detective Swan, fine. I'm going running. I will have my cell phone with me in case you need any assistance. As a police officer, I'm sure you're well aware of all the emergency numbers. If Henry wakes up before I return, let him know that there is leftover French toast in the refrigerator, which he can heat up using the microwave or toaster oven. He should put it in for-"

"Yeah, Henry knows how to use a microwave," Emma cuts in. "But I'll pass along the message. Have a nice run."

Regina wordlessly strides out of the apartment, slamming the door behind her, and Emma lifts her good arm to press a hand to her forehead, wondering what the hell is going on.

And whether or not it's all her fault.

Regina runs like her life depends on it. She's never been particularly focused on speed; she's not trying to race, after all. Her concern with fitness has always been secondary to emotional stability, and her brain doesn't care if she's making six minute miles or ten. But now she's gone thirteen miles in less time than it usually takes her to complete her ten mile loop, and she's still feeling strong.

Strong and angry.

Angry at Emma for not understanding; angry at herself for needing to be understood.

Angry and Internal Affairs and Locksley and Dr. Hopper for making her go on leave so she has nothing to think about but her fear; angry at herself for not being able to manage her emotions on the job.

Angry at Leopold White for taking away everything that made her life worth living and leaving her a broken, empty shell of a person; angry at herself for letting it happen.

As her feet pound the asphalt harder and faster and her breaths come in and out shorter and shallower, she wonders if this is the way it's always going to be. If she's just going to spend the rest of her life running from a past that never gets tired of catching up to her.

It's not Emma's fault, she thinks. It's not. Emma, for as much as she pretends to be healing faster than medically possible, has had a traumatic brain injury and can't be held responsible for some of the things that she says. She's got her own emotional stability issues right now – as much as she's trying to be blasé about the shooting – and she's not allowed to use exercise to help resolve them.

And Regina, well...perhaps she had been hovering. Perhaps she needs some space to calm down and give Emma some space to do the same.

Emma is alive, she reminds herself. *Emma is alive and healing as well as can possibly be expected.* Regina hadn't lost her; and she won't lose her unless she drives her away with an excess of smothering attention.

She stops, huffing and puffing, and leans forward to catch her breath. Sixteen miles later, her run has finally had its intended effect, and now she's exhausted and awfully far from Emma's apartment.

Checking her watch, she figures she'll walk back until her legs decide they can't carry her anymore, and then catch a taxi. It's a beautiful morning, and she walks sedately, taking in the scenery. Boston is lovely, she remembers. She sees a lot of this city every day, driving back and forth between various crime scenes, but sometimes she forgets that she actually loves it. That there's still a small-town girl from Storybrooke, Maine, inside of her that's in awe at everything the city has to offer.

She stops a farmer's market by the side of the river, where an older woman informs her that they're selling the first ripe tomatoes of the season from a farm just outside the city. After trying one and oohing and aahing over the rich flavor, she purchases a huge bag full, along with fresh basil and zucchini and sweet onions and organic noodles, figuring she'll make Emma a vegetable lasagna tonight as a peace offering (and maybe let her cut it herself). Her next stop is an artisanal cheese shop, where she buys four different varieties and enjoys a few too many free samples because running sixteen miles on an empty stomach has worked up her appetite in a way that she never thought possible.

And then she realizes she's two blocks from the station, and she might as well pick up some of her favorite coffee to fully enjoy the morning of shameless self-indulgence.

She runs into Robin in front of the coffee shop. She should have realized there were some risks in shopping too close to the station.

"Regina, hi," he says, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm...well, I was out running, and then I stopped at a farmer's market, and then I decided I needed some coffee. What about you?" she asks as casually as she can.

"Same – well, the needing coffee part, anyway. Blanchard wants to talk to you, by the way, as soon as possible. It's about the shooting. Swan, too, once she's...lucid."

"She's pretty lucid," Regina mutters under her breath. Then, more loudly, she promises, "I'll call Blanchard this afternoon."

"Great," he ways with an encouraging smile.

"Usual?" asks the barista. Robin nods and peers into Regina's shopping bags as he hands over his credit card.

"How is Swan, anyway?" he inquires. "Did you two get into a fight?"

Regina freezes. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, Regina, when you've known someone for over twenty years, you start to become familiar with their various 'tells.' And impulse-buying seasonal vegetables is one of your more unique ones."

She scowls.

"Let me guess," Robin continues, "you're going to make her your famous lasagna tonight in an attempt to smooth things over."

"We both need to make more friends," Regina grumbles.

"One medium regular, one large black," the barista calls out, and Robin checks his watch.

"I've got some time before I have to be back," he suggests, "if you want to talk."

"What good would that do?"

"Well, as you pointed out, we're each other's only friends, and I've found that talking about one's problems can sometimes be beneficial."

"Fine," Regina sighs, sitting down at a table next to the door. If anything, it's a relief to drop her heavy bags for a moment.

"So?" he asks, setting their coffees on the table. "What happened?"

"She thinks I'm smothering her," Regina mumbles. "Being overprotective. And maybe I am – I don't know anymore."

"You were terrified at the thought of losing her," Robin points out.

"Right. And, well, she called me out on it, and I...I reacted poorly. She got upset, and...it just spiraled." She laughs darkly. "She kicked me out to go running because she thought spending too much time with her was bad for my mental health."

He doesn't say "I told you so" and she feels like hugging him.

"Does she know?" he asks gently.

"About my mental health issues? No. I mean, I haven't told her."

"Have you considered talking to her about it?"

Regina shakes her head. "What exactly am I supposed to say?" she demands. "Hey, Emma, guess what? I have PTSD, and watching you get injured on the job triggered my flashbacks – let's go hop in the cruiser and chase down criminals together?"

"Maybe not like that exactly."

"I can't, Robin; she wouldn't understand."

"I think she understands more than you give her credit for."

"She's twenty-eight. Do you remember what we were like at twenty-eight?"

"Like overgrown puppies," he recalls with a laugh. "We were little baby idealists who somehow thought we could change the world when we could barely remember pay our car insurance bills on time. Detective Swan's not like that. She seems to have matured a lot faster than we did."

"But still, I don't - I can't weigh her down with unnecessary knowledge," Regina mutters. "Especially not while she's still recovering. I'm...I'm her

mentor. It's not appropriate; it's not my place. If I'm afraid of losing her, that's my burden to bear, not hers."

Robin looks thoughtful. "You know, if there's one thing I learned from losing Marian, besides pain and suffering, it's that anyone we love could get ripped away from us at any moment."

"Robin," she whispers, reaching out for his hand.

"And when we lose someone, it's natural to feel regret, you know? But the things we regret...at least for me, I don't regret any of the bad things that happened to us. The fights, as stupid as some of them were, I'd never take any of that back, because it made us who we are. The hard things made us stronger. It's the good things that didn't happen – the times I could have kissed her and I didn't, the times that there was silence that I could have filled by saying 'I love you,' the fact that we never redid our honeymoon..."

"Sorry about that," Regina says guiltily.

"No, Regina, it wasn't your fault. What I'm trying to say is that I had all these opportunities to make good moments with the love of my life, and I didn't take them. I could have been with her a year sooner if I hadn't been such an immature fool. So many happy memories that I let pass me by, and now that she's gone, they're lost to me forever."

Regina smiles softly as tears spring to her eyes and gives his hand a tight squeeze.

"I'm sorry, that wasn't meant to be a tear-jerking, 'pity me' speech. I'm sure you don't need one of those right now. It was meant as a reminder."

"A reminder of what? My mountain of regret?"

"No, a reminder that regret is pointless, but unfortunately, it's also inevitable. And the way to avoid it is not to miss out on those good moments because...I don't know, you're afraid or something. Just...get everything out on the table."

"So, you're saying I should make lasagna *and* garlic bread?" Regina teases.

"Stop deflecting, Regina. I'll let you draw your own conclusions."

She draws them. And she looks into his eyes and she knows. And he knows that she knows, and she's not sure whether that makes it better or worse.

Regina clears her throat uncomfortably. "Well, I've got to get home – I mean, to Emma's. This lasagna's not going to make itself."

"Right. Call Blanchard," Robin reminds her. "And take care of yourself. If you need to talk-"

"I have your number. And I'm meeting with Hopper again on Monday."

"Good." He hesitates for a moment before wrapping her in a tight hug. "For what it's worth," he whispers, "I'm proud of you. You give me hope."

"I have no idea what that means, but thank you, I suppose."

"See you back at work soon!" he calls as he starts the walk back to the station. Regina rolls her eyes and hails a cab.

She's not sure what she expects when she returns to Emma's apartment, but what she sees – Emma and Henry playing video games on the couch together, laughing and taunting each other – puts a smile on her face and calms her pounding heart. She stands for a moment in the doorway, just watching, wondering what it would be like if she could come home to this ever day. If this was her home.

"Hey, Regina!" Henry calls, and Emma looks up and flashes her a smile that says this morning's argument is forgiven, if not completely forgotten. "Want to play?"

"I...I don't know how." Regina's voice falters as she admits, "I've never played video games before."

"Well, then there's no time like the present to start!" Emma exclaims. "It's just Mario Kart, nothing too complicated. Here, you can take my place; my eyes are starting to hurt a little."

"Okay," she agrees, setting down the grocery bags and biting back the concern she wants to express about the effects of bright flashing lights on her partner's health.

"What'd you buy?" Henry asks, looking intrigued.

"I stopped by a farmer's market on the way back from my run and picked up some vegetables," Regina explains, sitting down in the open spot between mother and son. "I was thinking we could make lasagna for dinner, if you want to help me. Either of you," she adds.

"Yeah, that would be fun," Henry agrees. "Maybe we can play one or two games and then get started?"

"That sounds perfect," Regina says, still smiling. "Now how to I play this Mario Kart?"

Henry quickly explains how to operate the controller and they begin. It takes Regina a few minutes to get the hang of steering, but once she does, Henry declares that she's a far superior driver to Emma.

"Because she never lets me practice," the blonde murmurs. Somehow, in all of the excitement of the game, Regina had failed to notice that Emma had closed her eyes and leaned in to rest her head against her partner's shoulder. Regina thinks her heart skips a beat, and her skin starts to tingle, but there's a feeling of calm and contentment that washes over her like a warm summer rain, and it just feels *right*.

Henry is squished against her side and Emma is leaning on her shoulder and Regina has never felt more strongly that she's exactly where she needs to be. Her heart is filled to bursting and she knows, without a shadow of doubt, that she belongs right here, with them, from now until the end of eternity.

It doesn't last, of course, because nothing ever does. Henry's excited about the lasagna that no longer seems important, and Regina sends him to the kitchen to wash his hands before turning to her partner and asking, "Is it okay if I get up? Or do you need me on pillow duty?"

"It's fine," Emma says quickly. "I just need to rest my eyes a little. I'll probably join you guys in a few minutes."

"Okay. You'd tell me, wouldn't you, if you were starting to get a headache?"

"I'll tell you if there's anything you can do to help," Emma promises, which isn't exactly what Regina asked for, but it will have to do for now. She gently tucks a cushion under the younger woman's head and follows Henry into the kitchen.

"So, our first step is to wash all of the vegetables and start making the sauce," she explains.

Henry whistles. "We're making it by hand?"

"Of course, dear, it tastes much better that way."

They quickly get to work washing and cutting and peeling. Henry is an eager helper and learns his way around vegetable preparation very quickly, which shouldn't surprise Regina as much as it does. She'd been able to cook an entire meal by herself at his age, but his parents seem less likely than hers to insist on teaching cooking skills from a young age.

Perhaps she should stop making assumptions.

Regina adds some minced onion and garlic to the pot of tomatoes and chopped basil, adjusts the temperature to a light simmer, and smiles at Henry. "Now, let's start slicing that zucchini," she suggests, passing him a knife. "We want pretty thin slices, with uniform thickness. Curl your fingertips inward as you cut, so you don't accidentally slice anything off," she coaches as she gently adjusts his grip. "Slow and steady, this isn't Iron Chef."

"Yeah, that knife's pretty sharp, kid," Emma says from the doorway. "Be careful."

Henry rolls his eyes. "It's like I suddenly have two moms," he groans.

"Something wrong with that?" demands his mom.

"No, of course not. I meant that as an exclamation of joy."

"Good save," Emma chuckles. "So, anything you need me to help with?"

Regina blinks. "I...I suppose you can grate the cheese," she stammers. "It could probably be a one-handed job, but if your shoulder starts to-"

"Right. Pain means stop. I got it."

Regina passes her partner a block of cheese and a grater and watches worriedly as Emma starts to rub them together. It's clumsy and slow-going, but she seems comfortable enough, and Regina breathes a sigh of relief.

When Henry runs to the bathroom, she takes a deep breath and says, "Emma, I'm sorry about this morning. I...you were right, and I overreacted."

Emma shrugs. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that," she counters. "You were just trying to help.

"It may not have been your fault," Regina allows. "Having a concussion can increase your emotional volatility. I shouldn't have pushed you."

"That's no excuse. I just...I guess I'm not used to having someone take care of me. I don't always show appreciation the way that I should."

"And I don't always know how to give people space when I...when I'm afraid for them," Regina finishes, realizing in horror that she almost said something she definitely should never say.

"Well, we both have improvements to make for the future," Emma says brightly. "That is, assuming you want to stay here."

"Do you want me to stay?" Regina asks hopefully.

"I do. It's been really helpful for me, and I think especially for Henry. But, I mean, I'll understand if you want to be getting back to work soon."

Regina swallows. *It's now or never*, she thinks. "I'm not exactly on voluntary leave," she explains in a rush, getting it all out in one huge breath. "I have PTSD, and I thought I had it under control but...the shooting...after the shooting...I have to be cleared by Dr. Hopper before I can go back."

"Oh," Emma says slowly. "Okay."

"Just...okay?"

"Yeah, I mean, unless you want to talk more about it. Then, you know, I'm here to listen."

"I...okay, then," Regina mumbles, blinking furiously. She has no idea what she expected Emma's response to be, but it wasn't that. The big reveal has never been so simple. She's experienced her father's pity, her mother's disdain, Robin and Marian's obsessive attempts to cure her, but never the calm acceptance that Emma is currently showing, at least not right away.

But it seems that her partner misinterpreted her tears of gratitude as something negative, because Emma's hand is almost immediately rubbing her shoulder and she's whispering, "Regina, don't worry. If you think this changes anything, it doesn't. You're still my partner, and my hero, and you're probably the best friend I've ever had. Nothing is ever going to change the way I see you, okay? Nothing."

"Oh, Emma," Regina chokes. She's about to say something else – something that sounds suspiciously similar to "I love you" in her head – when Henry comes out and stares at them in confusion.

"I was gone for five minutes," he complains, rolling his eyes at Emma. "What did you do?"

"Why does it have to be something that I did?" the blonde protests in mock indignation. "But seriously, kid, I think Regina needs a hug. I'm one-armed right now, though, so would you mind doing the honors?"

Henry immediately complies, wrapping his arms around Regina's waist while Emma rubs her back. She shouldn't be letting this happen, shouldn't be allowing anyone, least of all her partner and her partner's child, to see her weakness.

But somehow, they're making her feel stronger.

A few minutes later, she dries her tears and washes her hands, and Emma and Henry let go of her and pretend that it never happened. And

Regina pretends not to notice if they're standing a little closer and speaking a little more gently or reaching out to touch her a little more often than normal.

And later, when they're devouring lasagna and Henry is flicking shredded cheese at them, she pretends not to notice when Emma fumbles with her fork and knife, and Emma pretends not to notice Regina's smile when she nudges the plate across the table and lets her cut her food for her. And then they both simultaneously scold him and meet each other's eyes, and Regina knows it doesn't mean anything. But at the same time, it means everything.

Emma's eye cracks open as she accidentally tries to roll onto her bad side and a sharp pain shoots through her shoulder. In the moonlight, she can see a figure standing in the doorframe. She doesn't need to look twice to figure out who it is.

"You can come in, Regina," she groans.

"Emma," the brunette gasps, "I...I was just-"

"Just watching me sleep, like you do every night. Yeah, I know. Only I'm not actually sleeping, so why don't you come in and talk to me instead?" she grumbles, patting the spot beside her on the bed.

Regina hesitates for a moment before taking the invitation and perching gingerly on the edge of Emma's bed.

"Couldn't sleep?" Emma asks.

"I could ask you the same," Regina says stiffly.

"Rolled onto my bad shoulder by mistake. You?"

"I...I was just uncomfortable." Regina looks down and looks like she's waiting to be caught in a lie.

Emma just shrugs her good shoulder and plays along. "Yeah, that couch isn't the most luxurious. You can sleep in here, if you want. The bed's much softer, and it's pretty big, even with me in it. You'd probably be more comfortable."

"I..." Regina's trails off, and she doesn't even seem to be paying attention. Emma follows her gaze to the slightly opened window and sighs. Regina's fingers are twitching, and she seems extremely agitated at the sight of it.

"You can close the window," Emma mutters.

Almost immediately, Regina practically leaps off the bed and slams the window shut, breathing a huge sigh of relief once she's finished locking it.

"Okay, now that my oxygen supply is diminished, do you want to come talk to me?"

Regina smooths the sheets and sits back down, carefully avoiding Emma's eyes. "Leaving your windows open is a huge risk," she says quietly. "Your building has a fire escape ladder; people...people could just...climb right in. You need to think about your safety, about *Henry's* safety."

"Yeah, but that's not exactly a likely occurrence," Emma protests. "Meanwhile, it's absolutely sweltering outside and I don't have air-conditioning, so..."

She stops talking and watches in alarm as her partner's face crumbles and she hugs her knees to her chest. *What the hell?*

And then she sucks in a harsh breath as she realizes: *White.* He must have climbed in through the window.

That's the only thing this could possibly be about. That's probably what *all* of this is about.

She's not equipped to deal with this, but she's going to have to try.

"Hey, Regina," she whispers, propping herself up on her good elbow and scooting closer to where the other woman is trying desperately to keep herself together. "Regina, talk to me. What's going on?"

Regina squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head. "I'm sorry, Emma."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about," Emma says soothingly. "You were trying to protect me; I was just being ungrateful and grumpy because...well, because my shoulder is sore."

"Are you having pain again?" Almost immediately, Regina's back straightens, and she checks her watch. "Do you need another dose of Tylenol? It's been over five hours since your last one. You're supposed to take it with food, but I think I saw some crackers in the cupboard that might be acceptable."

"Um...yeah, sure."

Emma watches in confusion as Regina quickly makes her way to the kitchen to retrieve the medicine, a woman on a mission. Then she settles back against her pillows and sighs.

Regina returns a few minutes later with the pills and some Saltines. She makes Emma eat the crackers and wait five minutes – not that five minutes would really make a difference, Emma thinks, but she doesn't complain. It's not about her, anymore.

She's not sure if it was ever completely about her, and the realization hits her with a mix of relief and disappointment.

Once the pills have been swallowed, Regina gets up to return to the living room, but Emma grabs her hand and pleads, "Stay."

"Emma, you need your rest," Regina protests. "I'm not sure if staying up to talk to me would be helpful for your recovery."

"Then we won't talk. It's just...you've been taking such good care of Henry and me while sleeping on my horrible couch. I feel guilty. You deserve a good night's sleep."

Reluctantly, Regina acquiesces, carefully lowering herself down to lie at the edge of the bed, as far from Emma as possible. The blonde tries to close her eyes, but sleeping turns out to be rather difficult when her tense bedmate seems to twitch every other second.

She forces herself to sit up and look at Regina, whose jaw is clenched. She almost seems to be trying to hold back tears. This isn't the time or place that Emma would have chosen for this conversation, but it needs to be addressed or neither of them is going to get any sleep tonight.

"It wasn't just the couch, was it?" she asks.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The reason you couldn't sleep."

"It...no." Regina lets out a shaky breath and admits, "No, it wasn't just the couch."

"Do you want to talk about it? Your other reasons, I mean."

"There's no need," Regina says stiffly. "It's...it has nothing to do with you; I wouldn't want to burden you, not when you've had a head injury and-"

"Damn it, Regina! I have a moderate concussion, not...permanent brain damage or something!" Emma exclaims. "My head won't, like, split in two if you accidentally treat me like an adult instead of a small child.

And, anyway," she adds in a much softer tone, "I've been burdening you all week; you might as well return the favor."

There's no response.

"Your window thing," Emma presses, "that's about White, isn't it? When he attacked you, did he climb in through the window?"

Regina rolls onto her side, turning away from Emma so the blonde can't see her face. "Yes," she whispers.

"And that's why you're afraid to keep the window open. Because one time you did, and he got into your house and destroyed your life. I get it. I shouldn't have complained."

"No," Regina says softly.

"No?"

"He...I didn't leave the window open. It was closed, and he broke it."

So it doesn't matter whether it's open or closed, Emma thinks. But she doesn't say that, just reaches her hand over to grasp Regina's again.

"You were right, you know," she murmurs. "About me, and my lack of safety awareness. I...I didn't think about it. I always think I'm immortal or something. I always worry that something's going to happen to Henry, but never about anything happening to me. I...it's never occurred to me that I could leave him without a mother."

Regina doesn't respond.

"What kind of parent am I?" Emma continues, eyes filling with tears. "Am I horrible for putting myself in danger every day, without thinking of his feelings?"

"No, of course not," Regina says quickly. "I think you're a very good parent, most of the time. And Henry...Henry respects your job. You're his hero, but...but you're also his mom. He needs you."

"I always forget that," Emma mumbles. It's easy to forget, she thinks, when her son lives four hours away and seems happier than ever with his constantly available and self-sacrificing father. It's easy to forget when she's alone.

"Well, you can't forget it," Regina insists. "Your – *our* job – it's important. But you're important, too, Emma. People need you. Henry needs you."

"Henry needs me," Emma reminds herself.

"I need you," Regina whispers. Her voice cracks, and the second she finishes speaking, she looks stricken, like she wants to take it back. "I...I can't be partnered with Jones again," she hurriedly continues. "You have no idea how detrimental that was to my sanity the first time around. Humbert was competent enough, but he's one of the least interesting people I've ever met. Booth is like Jones but worse, and, well, you know how I feel about Nolan's personality."

Emma smirks. "Relax, I'm not going to leave you partner-less. You're stuck with me. My injuries are going to heal, you're going to get cleared by the shrink, and we'll be back and stronger than ever in no time."

"Stronger than ever," Regina repeats. She rolls over so she and Emma are facing each other. "But we're going to be safe. You...I can't lose you. I can't."

"You won't," Emma says quickly. "And I better not lose you either. I know swans are usually wild animals, but I've grown accustomed to my cushy life as a pet of royalty. I'm planning to stick with Prince Henry and Queen Regina for a long time."

"I'm very glad to hear that," Regina replies in the most regal tone she can muster, "and I'm sure the prince will be, too."

"I should probably try to do something nice for him soon, huh?" Emma muses. "To make up for the whole almost-dying thing."

"He was mentioning the other day that he'd like to riding again. I was thinking, maybe next weekend...or possibly even during the week, since none of us has any commitments..."

"Wouldn't that just be you doing something nice for him and me sitting around and watching?" Emma points out. Then worried she might be hurting Regina's feelings, she adds, "I mean, we should totally do that, too. I think clean air and nature and all of that will be good for all of us. If you don't mind hanging out with your parents, though..."

"I'm perfectly capable of handling my parents."

"I know that," Emma says carefully, "but being capable of something doesn't necessarily mean that you should have to."

"Emma, I don't know what impression you got from our previous conversations, but I'm fine. I did, admittedly, have a few moments of not being fine immediately after the shooting, but I've recovered."

"I know that. And, among other things, I've realized that you're stronger than me."

"How so?"

"Well, I don't have any history of losing people close to me, but I can tell you one hundred percent that if our positions were reversed, and I watched you get shot, I wouldn't be fine. I'd – I don't know what I'd do, actually, but it would be really fucking scary. I mean, I don't really know how to tell you this, Regina Mills, but you're probably the second most important person in my life right now."

"Emma..."

"No, you are," she insists, so honestly it terrifies her. "And, like, I've never been very good at showing that, but I'm trying to improve, so whatever you need to do...if cutting my food and closing my windows and becoming my human crutch, or even yelling at me – if that makes you feel better, then do it. And don't let me make you feel bad about it, either."

"Emma, you don't have to-"

"Yes, I do. You're the queen, and I'm just your lowly pet swan that you've deigned to care for. I just...I just needed a reminder."

The slightest of smiles comes onto Regina's face, and she gives Emma's hand a squeeze. "Go to sleep, Emma," she murmurs. "I'll have the finest royal birdseed prepared for you tomorrow morning."

She doesn't move, though, and when Emma finally drifts off again, Regina's hand is still wrapped around her own, warm and comforting and protective.

"Men have forgotten this truth," said the fox. "But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose..."

"I am responsible for my rose," the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

"So," Archie says, raising one eyebrow as he reads the journal Regina has just passed to him, "it seems like you've had quite a few good moments in the last week."

"I have," Regina agrees.

"And it seems like about ninety-eight percent of them are with Emma, and...who's Henry? Is that her son?"

Regina looks down at her hands and squeezes the stress ball to quiet their fidgeting. "Yes."

"He has the same name as..." Archie trails off as he searches her face. "Does that bother you?"

She quickly shakes her head. "No. It was...it was jarring, at first," she admits. "I haven't met very many other Henrys. But...it's a nice name. It's his name; I don't think much about it anymore."

"I'm glad," Archie says encouragingly. "That was a bit of a trigger for you before, and it seems like you desensitized yourself without any help."

"Well, Henry helped," she explains.

Archie turns back to her journal and nods. "It seems that the two of you have developed a special bond."

"He's a very special child."

"And his mother?"

"What about her?" Regina snaps, suddenly guarded.

"I'm going to assume from your sudden change in demeanor that, although you've been living with her for the last week, you have yet to actually address your feelings for her. Is that right?"

"Maybe."

"And how is that working for you?" he asks, sighing heavily.

"It's fine," Regina replies quickly. Too quickly, perhaps. "I've been too busy taking care of her and Henry to really think about...about matters of the heart."

Dr. Hopper raises his eyebrows, but he doesn't comment on the obvious lie. "It's your choice whether you want to pursue anything," he diplomatically reminds her, "but I just want to be sure that these 'matters of the heart' aren't causing you any excess stress that might make you more vulnerable to further triggers. Our end goal is getting you

reinstated; I need to know you're mentally and emotionally stable enough to work."

"They're not," Regina says with complete honesty. "The shooting and the flashback were...it was a difficult weekend. But now, I...I feel different," she admits, "but not in a bad way. This...whatever it is with Emma and Henry, I think it's been good for me. I feel stronger."

"That's great, Regina." He squeezes her hand and almost looks like he's tearing up before clearing his throat and adding, "But it begs the question-"

"I don't know, Archie," she sighs. "I want to, but every time I try, it's like something stops me, and I can't figure out why."

"Well, I think you're afraid. Your reactions to the shooting make that fairly obvious. You've lost loved ones before; that can make it incredibly difficult to open yourself up again."

Regina shrugs. "You're not wrong, I suppose. I just...the other day, we all made dinner together, and it...it felt like a family," she admits as her eyes start to fill with tears. "It felt so amazing, and I...I wanted that. I want that so badly."

"To have a family again?"

"Yes. And it's because I'm afraid. I know that, and I know it's not rational, but even when I tell myself that, I still can't...I can't tell her how I feel."

"Are you afraid of rejection?"

"Not particularly, no. I know Emma, and I know she'd let me down gently. We could probably still be friends, but...I don't know."

"She's a woman," Archie points out. "Is that scary for you?"

Regina blinks and says, "I honestly haven't even thought about it much. But, it's not a particular concern. I'm...well, I don't know what I am, but...no, her gender is not a problem."

"Have you ever been with a woman before? I mean, you don't have to answer that if you don't want to, it's just-"

"Sexually?"

He shrugs. "However you want to define it."

"Once," she says tersely. Archie might as well know about her sex life (or her former sex life, anyway) – he knows everything else about her. "It wasn't...I wasn't...it was a one-time thing. Neither of us wanted it to be any more than that. And it was a long time ago."

It had been more curiosity than anything else, an experiment to spice up what would have otherwise been in incredibly boring bachelorette party; Marian had been drunk and Regina was in her second trimester with her hormones all over the place. It was a pleasurable experience, but one that, for various reasons, had never been repeated.

"Okay," Archie says. Regina briefly wonders if this is something people typically talk to their therapists about, but who else is she supposed to talk to? Robin has his own hang-ups when it comes to their respective love lives, Emma is *Emma*, and Regina isn't exactly close to anyone else.

"I haven't been in a relationship with a woman, if that's what you mean," Regina continues in a hurry. "But, I've also...I've only been in one relationship in my life."

"Only Daniel?"

Regina looks down, embarrassed, at her hands. "Right. I've had...encounters," she explains. "Probably not as many as most people, but...I've just never been interested."

"In casual sex? Or a relationship?"

"I don't know. Either? I...I had Daniel," she says simply, as though that explains everything. She had never needed anyone else.

Archie understands immediately. "Of course," he says softly, "and now?"

"I don't know! It's been...in three weeks, it will have been eleven years, but..." she trails off as a single tear rolls down her cheek, and Archie gently rubs her hand.

"You haven't been able to let go of Daniel," Archie says knowingly.

"I have!" Regina exclaims. "I've accepted that he's never coming back; you should know!"

"Accepting that he's not coming back and accepting that you're allowed to move on after over a decade are two different things."

"Daniel was killed because he loved me," Regina points out as more tears gush from her eyes. "He gave his life for me."

"Daniel was killed because Leopold White is a murderous psychopath," Dr. Hopper corrects. "But let's do a little thought experiment assuming what you say is true." Regina looks up, confused. "Pretend your positions were reversed, and you gave your life so his could continue. Would you want him to spend the rest of that life grieving you, or would you want him to remember you fondly and find someone who makes him happy?"

"I'd want him to be happy," Regina sniffles, lower lip quivering.

"And what makes you think he wouldn't want the same for you?"

"But if I move on...if I let him go..."

"Loving someone else doesn't make your love for Daniel any less. It doesn't mean that you have to forget about him."

Regina buries her face in her hands, and Dr. Hopper moves over to sit on the couch with her and soothingly pats her shoulder. "You had thirteen amazing years with Daniel; he made a huge impact on your life," he reminds her. "He helped make you the person you are today. All the good times, all the happy memories – you can let go of the pain without ever losing them, or losing him."

Regina responds with a loud sob. "I miss him so much," she admits. "I can't...I can't replace him."

"Of course not," Archie whispers. "He's irreplaceable. But you don't have to replace him. Even if he's not here physically, he's still *here*." He gently guides her hand to rest over her heart. "He'll always be part of you; his love can still give you strength. And anything you decide to pursue, with Emma or anyone else in the future, it'll just add to it. That's the beautiful thing about love, Regina; you can always add more without taking any away."

Chapter 14

Dr. Hopper (bless him) apparently gives Locksley a favorable report on Regina's progress, because later that evening, she gets a call from him, telling her that she can come back to work. The next morning, if she's up for it. Even as she's overjoyed at the show of confidence, she can feel her heart pounding and her vision begins to blur because she has no idea how any part of their conversation gave Archie the idea that she's ready, because she's *not*.

She sits down with a thud on the couch, and Emma instantly turns away from game she and Henry are playing, drops her controller, and starts lightly stroking Regina's upper arm.

Robin's still talking, though. "It would be...only part time," he continues. "A few days a week, maybe three to four hours max. You'd basically be stuck at a desk helping with paperwork. No gun, no badge – it's shit, I know, but assuming it goes well..."

Regina sucks in a deep breath, closes her eyes, and counts to ten. "So, it's just like the first time, then?" she asks, shakily exhaling.

"Yes...no," Robin mumbles. She can almost imagine him awkwardly staring at his hands. "I mean, same basic idea, hopefully a more accelerated timeline. I assume there'll be one, two weeks of this at most, and then you'll be back in action."

She takes another breath and doesn't reply.

"You're offended?" he guesses.

"I don't know."

"Do you want to take some time and call me back later?"

"Robin, I..." One breath, then another. "I'll call you back," she finally grits out. Then she hangs up and buries her face in her hands.

Emma gives Henry a sniff and grimaces. "Hey, kid, you smell," she says lightly. "Why don't you go take a shower?"

"Your 'creative' tactics for getting me out of the room for adult conversations are getting a little old," he mutters.

"It's not a tactic; you really do smell bad...and I really do need you out of the room for a few minutes."

"Fine," Henry huffs, stalking to the bathroom.

As soon as he leaves, Emma immediately moves to Regina's other side to wrap her good arm over her shoulders. "Hey, what happened? Are you okay?" she whispers.

"I don't know," Regina admits, hands trembling. "I...I don't...this-"

"It's okay if you don't know. Just...take some deep breaths, okay." Nodding, Regina obeys, breathing slowly in and out as Emma counts softly in her ear and rubs her back to the same rhythm. "Good job, you've got this," the younger woman coaxes.

She shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be piling all of this on Emma. "Emma, I-" she desperately tries to apologize, but the words won't come out.

"Shh, it's okay. Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

Hating herself more and more every second, Regina lets Emma soothe her until her heart and lungs have relaxed enough to let her speak. "Emma, I'm sorry," she whispers.

Emma shrugs her good shoulder and says, "Nah, we're good."

"I shouldn't...I shouldn't have ruined your evening like that."

"My evening is far from ruined, and I don't think it's something you can really control, anyway. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"Locksley told me I could go back to the station, starting tomorrow," Regina mumbles, staring at her hands.

"Okay," Emma says slowly. "That's...that's good, right? That's the goal. That means Hopper thinks you're okay, doesn't
it?"

"Yes...maybe?"

"Are you not ready?" Emma asks. Regina bites her lower lip and shakes her head slightly before leaning it against Emma's shoulder and squeezing her eyes shut. "If you're not ready, then don't go," she suggests immediately. "Call Locksley and tell him. He knows last weekend took a lot out of you; he'll understand."

"I know. It's just...it's not Locksley I'm worried about. The higher-ups...they tried to get me off the force before. They'll...if I say I'm not ready now, they'll start talking about long-term leave, early retirement..."

Emma lets out an angry puff of air. "They suck. They don't know what they're talking about – you're the best thing BPD has to offer."

"Be that as it may," Regina says with a light chuckle, "they're the ones in power. If I want to continue my career, I have to go back when they say so."

"I'm sorry," Emma murmurs.

"It's not...I won't be going to crime scenes, chasing down suspects, any of that," Regina quickly clarifies. "It'll be part-time at first, just sitting in the squad room, doing everyone else's paperwork. I have to demonstrate my emotional stability where they can see me."

"Ugh." Emma wrinkles her nose in sympathy. "I bet you're not happy about that, huh?"

"It *is* rather demeaning, but-"

"I mean, it's necessary, though, isn't it? That'll probably be me in a few weeks, too, once the neurologist clears me. And the idiots need someone to help with their paperwork – the whole place is probably in chaos without you."

"I wish I could just wait to go back when you do," Regina admits, against her better judgment. "That would make all of this a lot easier."

"Hey, it's a few hours, right? Henry and I will be fine on our own. Geez, you're like a new mom leaving her kid alone with a babysitter for the first time," she jokes, before realizing that was probably exactly the wrong thing to say and murmuring, "I'm sorry."

Regina ignores the humor and sighs deeply. It's not Emma and Henry she's worried about; it's not her ability to do her job, even the potentially triggering parts of it. It's walking back into the squad room knowing that the last time any of the other detectives saw her, she was sobbing on the floor and pointing her gun at Locksley's head. How could they trust her after that? How could they respect her? No one is going to want to work with her, and she's going to have to claw her way back up just like the first time.

It's taken her entire career to cultivate her reputation. Time and time again, she's had to prove herself capable, to jump over hurdles no one else has ever been subjected to. She's been dubbed too small to chase down suspects, emotionally unstable due to being female, compromised by victimhood, by PTSD...if she's too friendly with the male detectives, she's flirting; if she's not friendly enough, she's evil. She has to do twice as much as everyone else to get the same acknowledgement, and she's sick of it.

Robin still thinks he has to take care of her, never mind that she *should* be his boss. She has to inspire fear in her squad mates if she wants even an ounce of their respect, and even then they call her a bitch (or Evil Queen) behind her back. It wasn't until she started working with Emma,

another woman, that she realized what she was missing: someone who gives her the respect she deserves without questioning it. Someone who understands without having to be told that ovaries don't render a person incompetent. Someone who just fucking gets it.

The idea of going back to work without Emma, now that she's realized how things could be...it hurts. Feeling accepted, feeling validated, not having to hide her emotions all the time – it's so new and wonderful and now that she's had a taste of it, she doesn't want to give it up. She doesn't want to go back and face that never-ending ladder and the glass ceiling she keeps banging her head on. She's so tired, and her head hurts.

But then she looks at Emma and she thinks about how much easier it is for her, how much easier it is for all of young women just starting out. No matter how much she hates being called a hero, she knows that her fight has helped make Emma's career possible, and she'd never want to change that. If her going back to work tomorrow will help Emma, then she'll do it.

Because this amazing, brave woman, who has unknowingly given Regina such an incredible gift, has gone through enough struggles already, and if there's anything Regina can do to make her life easier, she will. For Emma, she'll keep climbing the ladder no matter how many times she falls down, and she'll keep banging her head until either the ceiling or her skull shatters.

"I don't know what's come over me," she says, clearing her throat and attempting to recompose. "This job has always been my life; the few

times I've had to go on leave before, I've always been determined to get back to it as soon as I could. I don't know what's changed."

"Maybe don't overanalyze it," Emma says lightly. "You feel the way you feel, and that's okay. Maybe tomorrow morning, you'll feel differently. And if you don't, that's fine, too. Look, I don't want to tell you not to worry about your career, since apparently you have to because BPD headquarters is full of sexist assholes, but if you're not feeling it tomorrow...take care of yourself first. Don't go, or come home if it's too hard. We'll be here with hugs, and I know Locksley will fight for you to keep your job."

"Emma..." Regina says softly, tears springing to her eyes. This isn't fair, because as hard as she tries to fight it, she's falling harder and faster for Emma Swan every second. And every time she thinks she's ruined it, that she's succeeded in driving the other woman away, it turns into something like this, something that brings them closer together and convinces Regina even further that her heart, every single damaged inch of it, belongs irrevocably to Emma.

It's completely terrifying and completely not at the same time.

Because she's falling, but Emma is catching her. Emma's hand is warm and protective on her back, and Emma's shoulder is soft but secure under her head, and it's strange and new and safe and familiar all at once.

But she can't have this. She may belong to Emma, but Emma does not belong to her. Friendship and acceptance aren't the same as love.

She has to stop doing this. She can't keep giving her heart away when she knows that some way or another, it's just going to end up crushed.

But it's hard to pull herself away from something that's drawing her in so strongly. Something that feels so beautiful and comfortable and perfect.

The water in the bathroom turns off, and Henry calls, "Are you two finished? Can I come out now?"

"You good?" Emma asks under her breath. Regina nods reluctantly and lifts her head from Emma's shoulder (though the hand running up and down Regina's back mercifully doesn't stop), and Emma calls out, "We're good, kid!"

Henry pokes his head out of the bathroom and asks, "Can we go buy ice cream?"

"For dinner?" both women ask at the same time, and he cracks up.

"Maybe as a pre-dinner snack?" he wheedles.

Emma shrugs. "I see nothing wrong with that." She turns to Regina and adds, "We always used to get good luck ice cream before the first day of school, this can be your good luck ice cream for your first day back at work."

"You're going back to work?" Henry asks, face falling. "Tomorrow?"

"It's just for a few hours," Emma tells him, "and then she'll be back to play with you and yell at me before you know it."

"Okay," he says agreeably. "Can we get ice cream now? Are you okay to walk a block?"

"Yeah, I'll be great."

"Emma!" Regina scolds.

"It's literally a hundred yards away, Regina. I'm allowed to resume moderate activities."

"Okay, but if you need to take a break, if your head starts to hurt-"

"You'll be the first to know."

Henry smirks.

He holds Emma's hand on one side and Regina's on the other as they walk (slowly, because Regina won't allow her partner even a second of overexertion) to the ice cream stand, and they sit close together in the cool night air, eating and intermittently talking about Regina going to work, their plans to visit Storybrooke on Friday, Henry's camp that starts in two weeks, and anything and everything else under the sun.

When Henry isn't looking, Regina lets her head rest on Emma's shoulder again, and when the Emma affectionately nuzzles her forehead, she wonders what's happening and whether she's afraid of it.

And she decides that she's not.

xx

In the end, she decides she's not afraid of going to work either.

There are a few moments of uncertainty. The first comes seconds after her alarm goes off, when Emma's hand tightens around hers and she feels absolutely no urge to extract it. She's been sleeping in Emma's bed every night since the first time, always as far away from the blonde as possible (and she wakes herself up every couple of hours to ensure that she hasn't accidentally drifted closer), but their hands somehow always end up intertwined, and she can never quite force herself to separate them. Emma doesn't seem to mind, and Regina doesn't remember the last time she slept so well. She's not sure if it's because of the comfort of the bed or Emma's closeness, but she finally understands the meaning of the term "well-rested."

The second moment comes about two hours later, after she's run and showered, when Henry decides to be a gentleman and walk her to her car. He's just finished excitedly informing her about his plan to write the second installment of their book, in which the Queen and Prince nurse their injured swan back to health, and he pulls her close and tells her to have a good day, and all she wants in that moment is to stay there, with his arms around her, and listen to his stories for a while before letting him lead her back up to the apartment to read or cook or play video games together and take turns forcing Emma to sit back down when she inevitably tries to clean the house or go grocery shopping or otherwise exert herself in ways she's not supposed to.

But she forces herself to get in the car and wave goodbye and drive away from the first place she's truly felt safe in almost eleven years.

The third involves her nearly passing out in the parking garage.

Her vision is hazy, and she's leaning against the side of her car, struggling to breathe, her fingers clenched tightly around the door handle, when she hears footsteps approaching from behind her. *In, out,* she tries to coach herself. She needs to have the presence of mind to face whomever this is.

Jaw clenched, she turns to glare at the intruder, to fight if she needs to.

It's ADA Blanchard.

Of course that insufferable woman wouldn't have the good sense to just keep walking.

"Regina, hi, long time no see," she says shyly and stares for a moment, arm raised in greeting, before finally realizing that the detective is probably shaking and clinging to her car for fun. "Are...are you okay? Do you need anything?" she asks.

"Yes," Regina mutters through gritted teeth. "I need you to leave."

"I – um, okay," the ADA replies, uncertainty oozing out of her. "Should I...I don't know, should I get someone? Locksley?"

"No," Regina practically growls. "I do not require anyone's assistance. I was just about to walk into the building before you disrupted me."

Squeezing her eyes shut, she counts to five before prying her fingers off the door handle. She immediately stuffs her hands in the pockets of her blazer and digs her fingernails forcefully into the skin of her stomach. It hurts like hell, even through the stiff fabric of her shirt, as her nails attack decade-old scar tissue that somehow still manages to be sensitive (psychosomatic, she's been told), but the pain is good. The pain *there* is familiar and calming in an odd way, and she's able to force a smile at ADA Blanchard and tell her, "Well, hurry up. I have things to accomplish today, and I'm sure you do, too."

Mary Margaret nods and shrugs her shoulders.

"That gesture is undignified for a lawyer," Regina scolds.

"Whatever," the ADA mutters under her breath.

They stride into the building in silence, neither acknowledging the other until Regina freezes again right in front of the squad room.

The idea that she might be lucky enough that Blanchard wouldn't notice turns out to be wishful thinking at its finest.

"I'll distract them," the ADA offers sympathetically, her face etched with pity in a way that would normally make Regina irate. Now, though, she barely notices because she's too busy thinking that if Mary Margaret

knows there's something for them to be distracted from, when she wasn't even present at the hospital, then it must be something they've been gossiping about, either at work or outside of it, and that upsets her even more.

Her stomach lurches, and she worries for a moment that her knees might give out, but then ADA Blanchard is walking into the squad room and greeting everyone, and Nolan's drooling over her and everyone else is mocking him, and Regina quickly slips behind her desk, sinking heavily into the back of her chair before she's noticed.

Alternatively, they may have noticed her but had the decency to pretend that they didn't. At this point, either one is acceptable.

Locksley comes out a minute later and sets her up with enough filing to last well into the evening, though he informs her that she's only allowed to stay for three hours, no exceptions. She grumbles for a moment, just for show, before getting down to business. It's about as boring as watching paint dry, but at least it's methodical and soothing. About five minutes into it, she's almost forgotten that she's missing her gun and badge and doing everyone else's busywork because she's not emotionally fit for her real job. That is, until she notices Blanchard standing over her shoulder, watching her.

Regina scowls.

"May I help you, Miss Blanchard?" she grits out.

The ADA shifts awkwardly and mumbles, "Sorry, I was just wondering how Emma was doing. She – well, none of us have really heard from her since she's gotten out of the hospital."

Regina softens a little. Concern for Emma is completely understandable and, as far as Mary Margaret goes, the most tolerable thing she could have come up with.

"She's been slightly out of it," Regina explains. "The concussion and everything. But she's feeling much better now."

"That's wonderful. Do...do you think she'd like it if I visited her?"

At that, Regina's moment of good humor is instantly forgotten. Emma would, in fact, probably enjoy a visit from Mary Margaret. She might like to see Nolan, Jones, and maybe even Humbert, too (Though she shares Regina's opinion about Booth). She's been getting much more social and upbeat as her brain continues to heal, and she's spent the last week in fairly limited company. It's Regina who has no desire to see any of those people, but it's not her place to dictate who can and can't come into Emma's home.

She's just a guest, really. A guest who's currently doing all the housework, but a guest nonetheless. So she clenches her jaw and mutters, "She has a phone, you know. Why don't you call her and ask?"

Mary Margaret doesn't appear to notice the shift in tone – it's still far more pleasant than the one Regina usually uses with her. She flashes the detective a friendly smile, grabs her briefcase, and leaves to work on whatever case she was here to collect information for – Regina is slightly horrified to realize she has no idea what's been going on at the station for the last week.

Not horrified enough to actually ask anyone about it, though.

As soon as Mary Margaret is safely out of the room, Regina breathes a sigh of relief and returns to her work. Filing is strangely mind-numbing – so numbing, in fact, that she completely loses track of time until she hears someone clearing their throat beside her.

She looks up with a start and sees Locksley standing there, tapping his watch. A glance down at her own wrist confirms that she forgot to wear one this morning – proof that she's not really back to normal yet – but the light filtering through the window has changed, and her pile of paperwork is about half the size it was when she started, so it's easy enough to deduce that a few hours have passed.

"Is this you kicking me out?" she asks.

"Not kicking, just letting you know that you've been here for three hours, which was our previously agreed-upon limit. How are you feeling?"

Regina considers for a moment, and then replies in complete honesty, "I'm alright."

"Good. I'd...I'd offer to let you stay for a few more hours if you're up for it, but-"

"No need," Regina says quickly. "I'll leave without a fuss."

"Really?" Robin looks shocked for a second before smiling broadly. "Then I'd say your first day back was a success on all counts. Should we start talking about your next day back now, or would you prefer to wait?"

"I..." Regina's voice trails off, and she stares at her feet.

There's a part of her, a part that came one hundred percent from Cora and was somehow immune to her father's "coddling," that's telling her she needs to go back tomorrow, that the more she delays, the more she's losing her place on the squad and the respect she's worked so long and hard to gain.

But there's another part of her that's reminding her she's supposed to drive Emma to her neurologist appointment tomorrow morning, and then she has an extra appointment with Hopper that she made to discuss this very issue, and after that, Henry wants to go on a picnic and people-watch on the Common. And that part of her brain is telling her that those

plans are so much more important than keeping the job and reputation she's built her entire identity around.

"I think two days in a row might be too much, too soon," Robin continues, almost as if he's reading her mind. "How about you take tomorrow off and come back in on Thursday? We can assess the situation further then, but we'll probably plan for you to take a three-day weekend. Is that okay?"

She wants to hug him, but there are other people in the room, so she settles with a quick nod and a genuine smile. "I'll see you Thursday, then," she says before quickly exiting the room.

Reviewing the day's events on her drive home (to Emma's – *not* her home, she has to keep reminding herself), she thinks it might be a stretch to say that her first day back was "successful on all counts." But then she opens the door of the apartment and Emma and Henry are there, smiling, and there's a giant pizza on the table, and Henry says, "Mom said she forgot the difference between twenty and twelve-inch crust because of her concussion, but she's really just a pig," and they all laugh and stuff their faces and she realizes that maybe it's not a stretch at all.

Maybe she just needs to do what Archie's always saying and re-examine her definition of success.

xx

"So?" Dr. Hopper asks expectantly when Regina walks in on Wednesday morning. "How was the first day back?"

She has to chuckle because he sounds exactly like her father asking about school when she was little.

"It was alright," she answers. "Better than I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"I just...I don't know," Regina sighs. "After what happened in the hospital, I was worried my squad mates might have a negative reaction, or pry into what happened. But they ignored me, for the most part."

Archie furrows his brow. "And that's acceptable to you?"

"For now, it is," Regina declares. "It's easier than the alternative. I just want to get through the next few weeks with as little struggle as possible, until...until Emma comes back."

"And then what happens?"

"Then...I don't know." Regina stares at her lap and frowns. "Then things can get back to normal?"

"You don't feel normal at work without her?" Archie questions.

Regina buries her face in her hands and wonders why she suddenly feels like she's on the wrong side of an interrogation table.

"I..."

"Everything you tell me is confidential," Archie reminds her. "And I won't judge."

"I...I'm starting to reconsider...certain things about my life," Regina finally admits.

Dr. Hopper immediately nods in understanding. "About the job?"

"I didn't miss it," she whispers. "I was gone for a week – over a week – and I didn't want to go back even once. And then, when Robin called and said I could, I had a panic attack."

He immediately reaches for her hand. "Regina, I'm so sorry, I didn't-"

"And then I had another, in the parking garage on Tuesday morning. In front of ADA Blanchard, of all people. She laughs darkly. "This job used to be the one constant in my life, and now...now I just don't know."

"Now you have another constant?" Archie suggests.

"The best part of my day was coming home to Emma and Henry," explains Regina. "It was the only thing that made leaving feel worth it."

"Regina, I'm sorry," Archie says. "I feel like this is my fault. When I told Robin I could clear you for desk duty, I meant-"

"No, it's okay," Regina interrupts. "Getting it over with sooner was better anyway. It gave me less time to dread it, and it gave the brass less time to think up new hurdles for me to jump over."

"Yes, but it sounds as though you felt forced, which wasn't my intention. I just wanted to leave the door open for you to go back when you chose."

Regina shakes her head. Archie's a good therapist, and an incredibly sweet person, but he has no idea how BPD politics work.

"It's fine," she reassures him. "I didn't go back because I felt forced. I did it for Emma."

"For Emma?"

Again, what is it with her mouth saying these things she meant to keep quiet? "Right," she mutters. "For Emma...Emma and the other female cops whose futures unfortunately seem to depend on my being labeled a 'hero.'"

Archie sighs. "That is unfortunate. But I think you need to put your own well-being first. Even heroes need personal time."

Regina stares at her hands and shakes her head again. "I still hate that word," she grumbles. "I'm not a hero just because I botched a U.C. and a psychopath tried to kill me."

"No, you're not," Hopper agrees. "You're a hero because after he destroyed everything you cared about, you got back up and rebuilt your life and your career. You're a hero because you found a reason to go on and you didn't let him break you."

"Sometimes that rebuilt life feels like it's standing on a very flimsy foundation," Regina says wryly, her fingers searching out the ring

around her neck, something to ground them. She doesn't want to argue with Archie right now, but sometimes she feels pretty damn broken.

"But you said you felt stronger with Emma," Archie points out.

"I do. I...I do."

"Have you given any more thought to that?" he asks. "Your relationship with Emma?"

"You mean in the two days since we've last spoken?"

"It's just that I remember you saying that your working relationship was one of the things standing in your way, and now it seems like you're questioning your love of the job, and-"

"No!" Regina quickly exclaims. "I still love the job. I'm not – having a few bad days doesn't mean I'm ready to retire."

"Of course not. I didn't mean to imply that. You've almost put in your twenty, though, having you?"

"In six months, technically. Add another six months if they decide not to count the time I was on medical leave."

"They can't do that."

"You don't get to tell them what they can and can't do," she says with a humorous laugh. "Anyway, it hardly matters. I'm not retiring within the next year, anyway."

"You haven't thought about it?"

Regina rolls her eyes. Of course she's thought about it. She's thought about how she'd have nothing to do and no one to keep her company as her unoccupied mind grows more and more anxious and her body starts to gradually waste away. If she could, she'd never retire.

It would be different, of course, if she had a family. Everything would be different.

"This job is my life," she says stiffly. "You know that."

"But why?" Archie presses. "Besides the fact that you don't feel like you have anything else? Why did you decide to become a cop in the first place?"

"I'm sure I've already told you that story."

"We've talked about a lot of things, but I don't recall that one."

"It's silly," Regina mutters.

"Tell me anyway."

"When I was younger, I...I was frequently bullied in school. I may have been a bit of a nerdy, and a little on the chubby side. It was very...it was difficult. My parents weren't exactly the best at teaching me how to handle it. I felt powerless."

"Powerless," Archie echoes thoughtfully.

"And I remember once that a police officer came to career day, and he said that his job was to find the people who hurt others, and to put them in jail so they couldn't do it anymore. I was nine, and...I know it sounds silly now, but I knew that was what I wanted. To protect people like me and get revenge on the bad guys."

"Would you say your career has met your expectations?" Archie asks.

"I don't know," she sighs. *No*, she thinks privately. Not at all, because her career ended up leading to someone hurting her much worse than any elementary school bullies ever could.

"What if you hadn't become a cop? What would you have done?"

"I don't know," she says again. "I would have...I haven't really thought about other jobs since then. My mother wanted me to get into business or law or be the first woman president, but I never wanted that. I think...honestly, the only other thing that's ever appealed to me was raising children." She laughs nervously. "Which, I'm sure, also sounds silly."

"None of that sounds silly," Archie says softly.

"Well, it's obviously not something I can have at this point, so there's no use even considering it."

"What makes you so sure you can't?" She levels him with her best glare and he blows out a resigned puff of air. "Okay, you're clearly not ready to talk about that. But, back to Emma-"

"I don't even know how I feel about her anymore," Regina interrupts harshly."So let's just drop it."

"I think you know exactly how you feel about her, and you've said as much in here before. Regina, I'm not trying to push you or pry into your personal life, I'm just trying to help you be happy."

"I'm happy the way things are between Emma and me."

"Just like you were happy on the force?"

"I'm done talking about this with you," Regina snaps, abruptly pushing herself off the couch and out the door.

"Regina, wait! I...I'll see you next Monday," Archie mutters, defeated, as she slams the door behind her.

Regina marches down the hall and doesn't stop moving until she's safely in her car, where she leans forward and rests her head on the steering wheel and tries not to cry. She wonders if her life will ever get less confusing, or if she's doomed to uncertainty for the rest of her days.

Maybe it's some kind of karmic punishment for not marrying Daniel.

Maybe she really is mentally unfit for duty.

xx

Friday morning dawns bright and early. Regina can hear Henry bouncing around in the living room, even though it's only five – Emma had said he wouldn't be able to sleep with all the excitement of their upcoming trip. She considers getting up to make him breakfast, coming up with a quiet activity for him so he won't wake Emma, who is improving but still needs much more rest than usual, but then she realizes that something is wrong.

Something is very, very wrong.

Somehow, in spite of starting out the night practically hanging off the edge of the bed in her effort not to touch Emma, Regina has managed to migrate all the way over to the other side of the mattress, and she's curled up against Emma's good side with one arm slung over the other woman's waist.

How the hell had she not noticed? She never sleeps so deeply that she wouldn’t register physical contact. Now that she's conscious, her entire body feels like it's on fire.

She can't be here; she can't do this. It's one thing to accept Emma's touch when they're both awake and it's freely and consciously given, even though she knows the contact means far more to her than it does to Emma, it's quite another to hug her in her sleep.

Gently, carefully, so she won't wake Emma, she starts to draw her arm back in toward her body and tries to roll over.

But then Emma, who she's certain is still asleep, unearths her good arm from under Regina and wraps it around her shoulders, pulling her in closer.

She sighs deeply and contentedly and Regina all but stops breathing.

There are tingles all over her body, radiating outward from where Emma's skin is touching hers, and she wants to scream and she wants to cry and maybe throw up and then run until she can't run anymore, but she also wants to stay here and snuggle, because it's been far too long since anyone has held her like this and she's missed it more than she has the words to express.

She lets herself lie there for a few minutes, relaxing into Emma's touch even as the dread and disgust in the pit of her stomach swirl and grow (she's almost certain that Emma would *not* be okay with this situation if she were to wake up) until her self-loathing supersedes her need for comfort and forces herself to extract her body from Emma's surprisingly strong grasp and flee into the bathroom before she wakes Emma or frightens Henry with the sobs threatening to burst from her chest.

Keeping her eyes carefully averted from the mirror, she practically rips her clothes off and dives into the shower where she finally breaks down once the sound of water becomes loud enough to drown out her tears.

It's going to be a long day.

xx

"Wow, this place is even bigger than I remember," Emma remarks as they pull up to the Mills-Martinez estate.

"That's impossible," Regina says tersely. "Houses are inanimate objects; they can't grow."

"Yeah, Mom, must be your brain injury talking," Henry jokes, but a quick glance at the back seat reveals that he's just as mystified as his mother.

Regina has been incredibly tense all morning, even more than usual, if that's possible. Emma thinks that maybe it's about seeing her parents, but that seems unlikely. When she'd called her mother the night before to let

her know they were coming, she'd seemed in reasonably high spirits. In a week of living together and a couple months of partnership, she's like to think she's become reasonably adept at recognizing the signs that Regina is upset about something. None had been present.

Now, though, there's clearly something bothering her, and Emma has no idea what it is. The soothing tactics she's used in the past aren't working either. Every time she reaches out to squeeze Regina's hand or rub her shoulder, the other woman recoils like she's been shocked with static electricity. It's confusing and awkward and Emma isn't quite sure what to do.

So she just shrugs, gets out of the car, and follows a stiff-backed Regina and bouncing Henry up the front walk, hoping for the best.

Big Henry answers the door dressed in riding clothes, because apparently small-town mayors don't actually have to work on Friday mornings.

Neither, apparently, do pioneering female CEOs of big-time investment corporations, Emma thinks as she hears Cora's high-heels – Who the hell wears high-heels in their own home? – clacking their way down the staircase.

Henry holds his daughter for a long time, slowly rubbing her lower back as she rests her head on his shoulder.

At this point in her life, Emma is mostly over wishing she had parents; at least half the time, they seem to me much more trouble than they're worth. Henry Martinez, though, is making her reconsider. She'd like to have someone to give her hugs like that: it looks like the kind of hug that would make all of your problems just float away.

Regina seems to agree, because her body is much more relaxed when she finally pulls away. "Mother, Daddy, you remember Emma and Henry," she says with a warm smile.

"Of course, dear," Cora says quickly, immediately coming over to give Emma a firm handshake. "How lovely to see you both again."

"Yeah, you too," Emma replies, and Henry just nods while Big Henry envelops him in his own hug. Then, a minute later, his arms are around Emma.

"Daddy, be careful," Regina hisses. "Her collarbone is still tender."

"I'm fine," Emma says quickly. What's a little shoulder pain compared to the best dad-hug she's ever gotten in her life?

"My husband's a bit of a hugger," Cora apologizes. She looks slightly embarrassed, but she quickly covers it up. "We were very glad to hear that you're recovering nicely. I think your injury gave everyone a bit of a scare," she adds with a glance at her daughter, who suddenly becomes very interested in her fingernails.

"It was a scary moment," Emma allows, suppressing a disappointed sigh as Big Henry finally releases her from his arms. "But I've been healing faster than the doctors thought I would, so I'll be back to normal in no time."

"That's excellent news," Cora says brightly.

"Regina's been a really big help," she suddenly feels the urge to add. "Helping me around the house and taking care of Henry and everything. I don't know what I'd do without her."

"It's nothing," Regina mumbles.

"It's not nothing," Emma argues. "It means a lot to me."

"And me," Henry pipes up.

Regina's cheeks turn an uncharacteristic shade of pink and she plays with the chain around her neck for a moment before clearing her throat and suggesting, "Should we start the riding lesson before it gets too hot?"

xx

Regina and the Henrys head out toward the stables, and Emma wanders into the kitchen after Cora. "Need any help?" she offers. "I'm not the most amazing cook, but I'm apparently decent at grating cheese one-handed."

The older woman laughs. "Well, this meal requires a lot of cheese, so your skills will certainly come in handy."

"Awesome," Emma replies as Cora hands her a block of cheese. "Cheese is pretty much Henry's favorite food group. Little Henry, I mean. My son."

Cora laughs again. "It's also Big Henry's favorite, although he's technically supposed to avoid it. He had a heart attack about five years ago, so we try to limit that sort of thing. But Regina's here, so we may as well indulge."

"May as well," Emma echoes.

The two women work in silence for a few minutes, before Emma looks up and sees that her partner's mother is staring at her. "Everything okay?" she asks

"My daughter seems quite smitten with you," Cora says, as if that explains anything.

Blinking in confusion, Emma barely notices when the cheese falls out of her hand and drops onto the stool with a loud thump. *What the hell does that mean?* "Um...thanks, I guess?"

"That was a compliment," Cora clarifies. "She really doesn't let many people into her life anymore, so you must be very special."

Emma shrugs and picks up the cheese, taking a quick break from grating to stretch her arm. "I don't know about that."

There's a far-off look in Cora's eyes as she explains, "It's quite rare. She's always had...walls, I suppose you would call them. And part of that was my doing; I urged her to strive for success, to put relationships on the back burner. She was very shy as a little girl, and some of the other children used to mock her...well, anyway, I always told her not to let their words hurt her, to focus on bettering herself so she could throw it in their faces at reunions. She took my advice, perhaps a little too well, and then, after the whole thing with White, it became about twenty times worse."

"I meant the part about me being special," Emma interrupts awkwardly, since it seems like Cora barely remembers she has an audience.

"Oh, yes, of course," the older woman says quickly, clearing her throat like she suddenly realizes she's said far too much. "I'm sure you're special, dear. Or, at the very least, you're special to her."

Emma raises an eyebrow. "Is this one of those 'mothers always know' things?" she inquires.

"It is. Regina and I aren't the closest, which is mostly my fault, but her heart is on her sleeve if you know what to look for. And I...I wasn't always as supportive as I could have been of her relationship with Daniel. I was very judgmental when she made choices that wouldn't have been the same ones I made, and I fear that I may have alienated her when she needed me the most. But now I realize...well, anyway, Miss Swan, I just want you to know that whatever is going on between the two of you, you have my full support. Not that you need it, of course. You're both adults who can choose how to run your lives."

"Thanks, then," Emma mutters, staring uneasily at cheese shavings on the counter and wondering how unsanitary it would be if she started playing with them. She needs something to keep her hand busy. "But, I think...I think you might be a little confused. Regina and I aren't...we're not-"

"Oh." Cora nods slowly and then says, "Of course not," like she doesn't believe it at all.

She picks up the spoon and starts rolling pasta dough again like nothing ever happened, and Emma stares open-mouthed at the cheese for a moment before finally shrugging and picking it up again, grating as

furiously as she can with one arm and a million different thoughts swirling around and colliding like there's a fucking tornado in her brain.

If she's understanding the conversation correctly – and the neurologist says her reflexes may still be lagging behind a bit but her language processing ability is perfectly normal – then Regina's mom thinks Regina...has some sort of feelings for her. Feelings of a romantic nature. She's pretty sure she just got compared to Daniel. Regina's fiancé. The one she was about to have a baby with.

She's not sure if she wants to laugh or run screaming for the hills. Maybe both at the same time.

It's not possible. It's not. She'd be lying if she said she had never thought about it, especially after that time they almost kissed, but Regina has never given any indication of being interested in women in general, much less Emma. And even if she was, it's not like they would ever be able to pursue a relationship. They're coworkers – more than coworkers, they're partners; there are professional barriers they just can't cross.

But if they could?

An image pops into her mind, so vivid it almost feels real. An image of her and Regina cooking dinner together, laughing and joking with Henry, listening to music as they clean the kitchen together and then playing video games for a while before kissing each other good night. Then they would curl up in bed together, skin on skin, and hold each other close to

ward off nightmares. Regina would wake up first and rouse Emma with a kiss on the cheek, and then they could go running together and come home to shower and feed the kid breakfast before carpooling to work.

"Ouch!" she suddenly exclaims as she accidentally grates her finger. She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't noticed the block of cheese slowly disappearing from her hand.

"Looks like you're finished," Cora remarks. "Is your finger okay?"

"I think so," Emma says, studying it closely. "Looks like I didn't break the skin."

"Glad to hear it, dear," Cora says. "I was thinking we might wait for the others to come back before continuing our preparations; Little Henry might enjoy making ravioli."

"I bet he would. Regina taught him how to make lasagna last week, and he had the time of his life."

Cora nods. "Regina's famous lasagna. She got that recipe from me, but the red pepper flakes are her own special touch."

"They're a nice touch, but I'm sure it's also pretty good without them. Your family is really into pasta, huh?"

"I'm fairly certain pasta is as close as this world gets to magic."

Emma laughs and decides that she likes Cora Mills, even if her assessment of her daughter's relationships is *way* off.

xx

"Your mother told me about what happened at the hospital," Big Henry murmurs as he and Regina walk sedately to the barn, Little Henry running ahead of them. Regina groans. Of course, that would explain why he's been shooting her concerned looks and has barely removed his arm from around her waist since she arrived.

"I'm fine, Daddy," she says curtly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you," he continues. "I didn't find out until much later. Apparently, your mother thought-"

"I said I'm fine. We don't need to talk about it anymore."

"I know, sweetheart, but I just want to make sure you know that if you do need someone, we're here."

"I'm seeing Dr. Hopper again," Regina says robotically. "It's been helpful."

"I'm glad to hear it. I just wanted to remind you that you also have parents who love you, and if there's anything we can do, you shouldn't hesitate to ask us."

"I know, Daddy. I...thank you. I just..."

"I'm sorry," Henry says, stopping to wrap both of his arms around her. "I know you don't like to talk about it. I just wish there was anything I could do to take this pain away from you."

"I'm fine," Regina insists, but she lets her father cradle the back of her head and leans against him. She's far too old, she thinks, to still rely on her parents for comfort. Especially her father; every time she hugs him, she's struck by how much smaller and frailer he feels since the last time. She knows it's partially her imagination, that her father still works full-time and plays golf and rides horses and is generally fitter than he was ten years ago. He had taken the doctor's advice very seriously after his heart attack.

Still, it's hard to ignore the fact that he's already seventy-five, and her mother is pushing seventy. They're both healthy and active, but still, she

worries.

And they would both probably tell her she's getting anxious over nothing and they're both going to be around a while, long after she's gotten sick of them, but she can't seem to stop herself and she keeps hugging him tighter until he clears his throat and suggests they hurry up and get to the barn.

Little Henry is waiting in front of Bear's stall. "Can I ride him again?" he asks.

Big Henry looks at Regina, and she immediately nods. "Of course," she replies, forcing a smile.

"Phoenix hasn't been out in a while," her father says. "Would you like to ride him, Regina?"

She shrugs. "Sure." She doesn't know anything about Phoenix – one of her father's more recent trainees – but she's never had a problem with any of her family's horses. Except Blue. Blue has always hated her for no reason.

He helps them groom and saddle the horses, then leaves them to their own devices so he can exercise Blue somewhere that Regina's presence won't trouble her.

When they're out of Big Henry's earshot, Little Henry turns to Regina and says, "Your dad's pretty cool.

"He is, isn't he?" Regina agrees.

"Do you think he should be in our book?"

She raises her eyebrows. "I'm sure he'd be flattered, but what would his role be?"

"I don't know," Henry says with a shrug, "but I'm sure I can think of something."

"How's chapter two coming along anyway?" Regina asks.

"It's good. I haven't had that much time to write it, though, because I don't want Mom to see."

"She did find your previous portrayal of the swan slightly unflattering."

Henry giggles. "It's not the smartest swan," he says mischievously, "but I have big plans for it. I've already got the ending written in my head."

Regina stares at him in confusion. "What do you mean, you know the ending?" she demands. She doesn't want their story to ever end.

"Not the whole thing, just this installment. I just need to wait for it to actually happen."

"I see," says Regina. She's still confused, but she supposes she can deal with it. "I hope there are many more installments to come."

"Me too," Henry grins. "So, anyway, I read online that the next speed above a trot is a canter. Can we learn that today?"

Regina laughs and tells him they can, and the rest of the lesson, not to mention the rest of the visit, is a huge success. Henry proves to be excellent at both cantering and making ravioli. On the drive back to Boston, looking over her two sleeping passengers in the rearview mirror, Regina is pleased to note that this time, there hadn't been any awkward questions leading to hurtful comments from Cora, and no uncomfortably emotional moments between herself and Emma. Of course, that means there are no almost-kisses when they return home, but nothing can be perfect.

Besides, she's not sure she has the emotional wherewithal to deal with another incident like that, she thinks as she crawls into bed beside Emma and pushes several pillows between them so she won't wake up to any more horrifyingly pleasant surprises. Her body is itching to inch

closer, to feel the warm and comfortable body in her arms again, but she can't.

Part of what she told Dr. Hopper is true, at least: she is happy the way things are between her and Emma. She's happier than she's been in a very long time, happier than she had thought she ever could be (or deserved to be) again.

It's greedy to want more, not to mention pointless. Soon enough, Emma will heal, Henry will go back to New York, they'll both go back to work full-time, and Regina will move back to her own apartment. Everything will be back to as it was before; the alternative is unthinkable.

And Regina will have to relearn how to be satisfied with it.

She rolls onto her side and stares at Emma's peacefully slumbering form across the mountain of pillows between them and feels her eyes fill with tears. She squeezes them shut and tries to silence the voice in her head telling her that she isn't even satisfied right now, and she waits for sleep to come.

It doesn't.

xx

The next week passes by quickly. Regina goes to work four out of five days; she's still just doing filing and people only speak to her when they absolutely can't avoid it, but she finds she doesn't mind it. She keeps her head down and leaves without complaint when Robin tells her to (she can tell she's confusing him, and she thinks she might be enjoying it). Every morning, leaving gets a little easier, because every afternoon when she comes home, Emma and Henry are waiting for her. As Emma continues to improve, they start leaving the apartment more often, going for walks and people-watching downtown. Regina's Mario Kart skills improve, and Henry starts teaching her how to play other video games. Her favorite involves people magically dueling each other.

Emma starts to grow restless as her mind returns to normal but she's still not allowed to fully resume her normal activities. She can tell she's starting to drive Henry insane by relying on him for entertainment when Regina's not there, but he puts up with it, probably because he's still somewhat afraid of losing her. She reminds herself that she has to do something nice for him, because Regina's riding lesson doesn't count as *her* gift, but she's at a loss for what.

She thinks she could ask Regina for advice, but she's almost scared to try, because Regina has started doing her hot-and-cold thing again and she's not sure what to make of it. At this point, she's almost certain that it has nothing to do with her, but that doesn't make the random barbs hurt any less. However, it does help that they're always followed by an apology that includes homemade desserts.

Overall, though, she has to say that – boredom notwithstanding – she's really enjoying her recovery process. She gets to spend more time with her son than she has in years, and although she's never been the roommate type, it's kind of nice to live with another adult. She sometimes wonders if maybe Regina wants to continue the arrangement after their period of convalescence is over.

Then she quickly pushes the thought from her mind because, no matter what Regina's crazy mother might say, that's not possible. She tries not to think too much about Cora's assessment of Regina's feelings. She doesn't know for sure whether or not it's true, but she does know that, deep down, she wants it to be, and that's bad enough.

xx

Emma is sitting alone one afternoon, attempting to read the copy of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* that Henry left lying around. She hopes that maybe an easy book that she's read a hundred times before will somehow be able to occupy her mind without giving her a headache.

That's strange, she thinks when she hears a knock at the door. Henry is with Neal, shopping for the long list of stuff he needs to bring to summer camp, and won't be back for several hours. She's not expecting anyone – well, maybe Regina's supposed to finish work soon, but Regina doesn't knock anymore.

Come to think of it, she's not sure if Regina has ever knocked.

She opens the door to see Mary Margaret Blanchard standing stiffly in front of it, holding a paper bag.

"Mary Margaret," she says in surprise. "Hi! Come in."

"I just came by to bring you a sandwich," the ADA explains. "It's from Regina – I guess Locksley's taking her to the shooting range as one of her tests for returning to active duty."

"She'll pass," Emma declares.

Mary Margaret nods and hands over the bag, shifting her weight uncomfortably between her feet. "She says she doesn't know when she'll be finished, but she wants to make sure you eat."

Laughing, Emma shakes her head. "She still doesn't think I'm capable of making my own lunch, apparently. How'd you get stuck on delivery duty? She threaten to kill you if you don't watch until I finish?"

"Well, she's trying not to do that anymore, but yes, she was very insistent that I make sure you eat."

"Come on in, then," says Emma, opening the door wider. "Long time, no see, huh?"

"Yeah, sure," the ADA replies, eyes grateful as she enters the apartment. "I'm sorry I haven't called. The last few weeks have been busy, and...well, I heard Regina was staying with you, and-"

"It's cool," Emma replies quickly, with a reassuring pat on Mary Margaret's shoulder. "I wasn't really up for much social interaction, anyway."

Mary Margaret nods. "So," she asks, "how have you been?"

"I've been pretty good. My head feels almost back to normal, and I'm allowed to resume light arm movement soon. I might be back at work in one or two weeks – just desk stuff, though. The neurologist wants to be cautious. I guess if you just got a concussion, you're at a much higher risk for another."

"Makes sense; your brain is still tender or something. Anyway, that's great!"

"Yeah, I'm getting a little bored just sitting around here, especially now that Henry's hanging out with his dad for a few days and Regina's back at work and stuff." Especially since she's not allowed to do much

physical activity besides walking, and reading or watching TV for more than ten minutes at a time gives her headaches.

"Well, I'd say boredom is a good sign," says Mary Margaret, always one to look on the bright side of things. "It means your brain is working again."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Anyway, this is a pretty nice place. I love that throw," she comments, gesturing to the quilt draped over the back of the sofa.

"The one with horses and apples all over it? Thanks, but that's actually Regina's." So is the pillow – Regina had brought them over to make the couch more comfortable, although she hasn't actually slept there for quite a while. Emma supposes Mary Margaret doesn't need to know that, though.

Is it weird that they're sleeping together? Well, not *sleeping* together, but...okay, now that she thinks about it, it might be kind of strange. Especially since...

But Emma doesn't feel like thinking about that right now, so she doesn't.

"So, are you going to eat your sandwich, so I can give Her Majesty a favorable report?"

"Oh, yeah." Emma mumbles, suddenly remembering the sandwich – the reason Mary Margaret is even here. She sighs. "It probably has sprouts on it. She's been trying to improve my eating habits. Here, let me get a plate."

Mary Margaret follows Emma into the kitchen and snickers. "Nice apron," she teases.

"Oh, this? That's Regina's, too. Come on, do I really seem like someone who would wear an apron?"

"No, but neither does she."

"Fair enough," Emma allows, grabbing a plate from the cabinet before skillfully unwrapping her sandwich with one hand. "She does have really expensive clothes, though. It would suck to get tomato sauce all over them. Her dry-cleaning would – wait, no! I can't believe it! She got me a BLT."

"Is that a good thing?" Mary Margaret questions.

"It's a very good thing," Emma proclaims as she takes a giant bite of the sandwich. It means I'm winning her over."

Mary Margaret cocks her head thoughtfully to one side and says, "I see." She hesitates a second before asking, "Is...is there something going on between you two?"

Emma swallows and shrugs. "I honestly don't know," she admits. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason, just...well, it seems like she's pretty much moved into your apartment, and now you're talking about winning her over. I don't mean to pry," the ADA explains quickly. "I really don't. But it almost sounds like...maybe you want there to be something?"

"It does, doesn't it?" Emma asks, dropping her sandwich with a sigh. She should have known she wouldn't be able to avoid facing these feelings forever. She's always been good at putting up walls, keeping things hidden even from herself, but they always fall apart at some point.

And it appears that point starts now.

"Do you?"

"Maybe? I mean, I wouldn't be opposed, you know? Except for the fact that we work together – that's a pretty big issue. I definitely had kind of a little-girl crush on her when we first met, but I just ignored it, because-"

"Because you work together?" Mary Margaret guesses. "I understand."

"Yeah, I bet you do. But it's not just that. I mean, even if I'm interested, that doesn't mean she is. Like, is she even into women? I know she was engaged to a guy before, and I just...you know?"

"There is such a thing as bisexuality, you know?" Mary Margaret points out unhelpfully.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Emma snaps. Mary Margaret smirks, and Emma realizes that she just sounded a whole lot like Regina. She quickly pushes the thought from her head. "But I don't know if *Regina* is bi."

"Right. I don't know that either."

"And she knows that I'm gay, so I feel like she would have said...I mean, if someone tells you they're into women, that might be something where you'd say, 'Hey, me too!' Wouldn't it?"

Mary Margaret shrugs. "I think it depends on the situation. And I also think that Regina's stance on sharing personal information might be different from yours or mine."

That's true, Emma admits to herself. She's always been a fairly private, reserved person – and so is Mary Margaret, to some degree – but Regina takes it to a whole new level. It's only after living together for the past few weeks that she's beginning to feel like she has a handle on understanding her partner. And even now...well, she assumes that if Regina liked women, she would have known about it by now, but maybe not.

"I probably shouldn't even tell you this," Emma says hesitantly, "but Regina's mother apparently thinks she's 'smitten' with me, whatever that means."

"Smitten means-"

"Yeah, I know the definition. I may not have gone to law school, but I've opened a dictionary or two. I just...I don't know what it means for *her*. Like, how would I know if that was true?"

"Are you really interested? In Regina, I mean? Romantically?"

Emma thinks for a few seconds; that's all it takes. "I am."

"And you want to...pursue that?"

"If we didn't work together? If I knew she was interested, too? Yeah, definitely then. But I have no idea. It would be weird just to ask her."

"I think, with Regina, you can't exactly listen to what she says. I mean...definitely listen to her, because that's what respectful people do, but you have to pay more attention to what she *does*. She might say she hates you, but then she'll do things like convince her rich mother to pay your law school tuition and write you an unsolicited letter of recommendation for your dream job, and then you'll realize that...that things aren't always what they seem on the surface."

"It sounds like you speak from experience," Emma observes. Under normal circumstances, she might be curious about this newfound revelation – Regina's relationship with the ADA is apparently more complicated than she'd thought. But now, she's just thinking about Regina making her dinner and watching her sleep and driving her to all her doctor's appointments and wondering if maybe there's some truth in what everyone's telling her.

But, honestly, that terrifies her. Having a little unrequited crush on Detective Regina Mills, legendary hero cop and the best partner ever, is one thing. How many straight women who just want to be friends has she had feelings for in the past? It's a part of life, one that she's become a near expert at handling. But the idea that those feelings might be returned is...that's something she has no idea how to handle.

People are talking about "pursuing" Regina, and she has no idea what that means. She knows how to flirt with women, sure – she's done that countless times. Asking them out on dates, inviting them back to her apartment or following them to theirs, having a good time together and then breaking it off after a few weeks at most. But Regina is different.

Emma's feelings about her are different.

She doesn't want drinks and dancing and sex with Regina – well, maybe she wants those things, too, but it's more than just that. Regina has *already* lived in Emma's apartment, has slept in the same bed with her in a domestic way, rather than a sexual one. They've met each other's families – Henry...Henry just adores Regina – and shared secrets, and...

No, if Emma were to pursue Regina, it would turn into something serious. Their situation and her own feelings would make anything less than serious feel disrespectful.

But that's just not going to happen.

"But, anyway, there's no point in even talking about it," she says definitively. "We *do* work together, and I don't get involved with coworkers. That's just a disaster waiting to happen, and whatever Regina's feelings toward me are, I bet she would agree."

Mary Margaret's face falls. "Maybe you're right," she says quietly.

"But, I mean, being partners is really different from, like, working in different departments that sometimes collaborate," Emma offers.

Mary Margaret smiles sadly and starts to walk toward the door. "I better get going. I have a bit more to do tonight, and I wouldn't want to distract you from that sandwich you're supposed to be eating."

"Oh, right, this," Emma laughs. "Bye, Mary Margaret. Thanks for coming over!"

"My pleasure," the ADA replies. "Hopefully I'll see you at the station soon?"

"That's the plan, anyway."

As Blanchard walks out the door, Emma takes another big bite of her sandwich and forces herself to think about anything but Regina.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Note: Thank you all for your lovely reviews. I'm sorry if I didn't get a chance to reply to you; please accept this super speedy update in place of that. It will probably answer all of your questions, anyway.

If you're a soundtrack person, I recommend "Lord of the Rings" by the Piano Guys and "All for Believing" by Missy Higgins to accompany this chapter. I also recommend tissues.

TW: This chapter contains references (not incredibly detailed ones, but still) to Emma's suicide attempt and White's attack on Regina.

Of course nothing good can last forever, Regina thinks as she helps Henry and Neal carry the boy's duffel bag to the car. He's going to spend a few days in New York with his dad and friends before finally leaving for summer camp. Emma won't see him for a month, which means Regina won't either. It shouldn't hurt as much as it does.

But god, it hurts.

He gives his mom a long hug and tells her to stay safe before turning to Regina and promising that he'll finish chapter two as soon as he can. He

squeezes her hand tightly and it's all she can do not to burst into tears. "Have fun," she tells him, and slips him her address on a piece of paper so he can write her letters.

Emma cries when Henry leaves, which Regina supposes isn't entirely unexpected. She can't decide whether they're at a point in their relationship where she should try to comfort her partner or pretend that she doesn't see. She settles for the awkward middle point of silently patting Emma's shoulder while looking out the window at a sky that's fittingly decided to rain.

She brightens up, though, after back-to-back appointments with her neurologist and orthopedic surgeon. The former reports that her cognitive tests have all returned to the levels required to declare her symptom-free. He recommends avoiding strenuous physical activity and using caution before operating machinery, but says that overall she's doing great. And then the orthopedist says she can stop wearing the sling and start going to physical therapy. She's over the moon as she and Regina eat dinner together, talking about how excited she is to get back to marathon training soon, to return to work and have something to do with her life again, when suddenly her face falls.

"What's wrong?" Regina asks.

Emma opens her mouth and Regina's heart instantly clenches, and she wishes she could take it back because she knows. She knows exactly what the answer is going to be, and she doesn't want to hear it.

"Well, Henry's gone," Emma says slowly, "and I'm back to normal and probably don't need a baby-sitter anymore, so...I mean, I assume you'll want to get back to your normal life soon, and I just..."

Regina tries to answer, but her throat is dry and her hands are trembling under the table. The sound of her heart shattering into tiny pieces might only be in her head, but it's louder than a bomb. *Get back to her normal life?*

The idea of going back to a life where she goes home alone every night (when she's not so afraid to return to her apartment that she sleeps at the station instead), where there's no one holding her hand when she's sleeping, no sound of steady breathing to soothe her when nightmares wake her up. Going back to a life where the only thing she has to look forward to every day is running and insulting Detective Jones –

Well, she supposes that's not entirely true. Emma will be back at the station next week on a part-time basis; it's not like she'll never see her again.

"I should probably get out of your hair soon," she tries to joke. "Before we start getting sick of each other."

Emma nods sadly. "I mean, as far as roommates go, you've been a pretty good one when you're not yelling at me," she says, attempting a grin that looks more like a wince (and Regina's stomach clenches wondering if it's about her leaving or hurting the younger woman's feelings), "but

we'll probably start irreversibly pissing each other off sooner or later, and that wouldn't be great for our partnership."

Regina stares down at her spaghetti and swallows the lump in her throat. Suddenly, she's afraid she'll be sick if she eats another bite. "I'll...I'll start packing my things," she whispers, abruptly standing up to clear her plate. "I can move all the dishes to the sink if you're okay to wash them. I-"

"Regina, wait," Emma calls. She jumps up and lightly touches Regina's forearm, stopping her movement. "I didn't mean...you don't have to move out right now. You could, like, wait until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Regina murmurs, exhaling slowly. She places the dish back on the table with a slight nod. "Tomorrow it is."

Tomorrow gives her one more night. One last night of safety, of Emma.

You can't have this, she tells herself as she lies in bed that night, head rested on Emma's stomach as her partner sleepily plays with her hair. *You shouldn't even let yourself want this.*

When Emma's breathing slows and the stillness of her hands indicates that she's sleeping soundly, Regina finally allows her tears to fall. "I love you," she whispers, and even the soft words pierce the night's silence, sounding like a clap of thunder in Regina's ears, and she lets the sound pummel her as she gives over the last bit of her bruised and

fragmented heart to the sleeping woman beside her, who isn't even slightly aware of strange excuse for a gift that she's just received.

xx

Regina doesn't cry when she moves out the next morning, having spent all her tears the night before. She can't let Emma see her break down, not again, and not about this. So she just pretends she's leaving for work with a pillow and blanket and a lot of extra clothes in her car.

Maybe she'll spill coffee on herself, who knows?

Maybe she'll need to take a nap in the break room. Stranger things have happened.

She pretends not to notice when Henry's not there to walk her to the car, or when Emma chews at her lower lip and won't meet her eyes when she says goodbye.

She drives to the station and buys herself a large coffee and sits down at her desk like it's a perfectly ordinary Wednesday morning, boots up her computer and is about to start going through the pile of paperwork she's supposed to take care of – Jones's, so who knows how much extra time

it's going to take – when Locksley perches at the edge of her desk, looking concerned.

"How many hours do you want to work today?" he asks.

Regina furrows her brow and demands, "What do you mean?" Her daily hours are already fixed – she's up to six now, and Locksley's usually pretty rigid about making her leave at the correct time. They'd just discussed the change after her appointment with Hopper two days before – why the hell is he trying to change it already?

"Just...you know, whatever you feel like doing, that's fine. You need to duck out early, stay late..." he trails off and fidgets with his wedding ring. "Whatever you feel like doing," he repeats.

"Okay, thanks, boss," Regina says sarcastically, still befuddled by his sudden shift in demeanor. "Are you going to allow me to actually complete my work now?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course. I...if you need anything, I'll be right in my office," he says hurriedly.

That was odd, Regina thinks, watching his back as he walks away. Then she just shrugs and starts searching the drawer for her favorite pen. Despite the amount of time she's known him and the number of secrets they've shared, Robin is still sometimes inscrutable to her.

It's not until a couple of minutes later, when she catches a glimpse of the date on her computer screen, that understanding washes over her like a bucket of ice-water.

It's July sixteenth.

The pen drops out of her hand and her entire body stiffens. Frantically stuffing a fist in her mouth to keep from crying out, she springs from her chair and bolts out of the room as fast as her legs can carry her.

Air. She needs air.

How the hell could she have forgotten?

She paces back and forth on the sidewalk and contemplates. Had she been so preoccupied with her feelings for Emma that today had somehow slipped her mind? Is forgetting about White's attack somehow a sign of healing?

Or is it a sign that she's allowing herself to forget Daniel?

Daniel, I'm so sorry, she thinks at the sky, as if he's up there somewhere with nothing better to do than read her thoughts. *My love, I'll never*

forget you.

Even though she is forgetting him, she reminds herself guiltily as she leans hard against a streetlamp, clutching it so tightly her knuckles turn white. Every day, he slips a little further away from her. The memory of his death might be as vivid as the day it happened, but their life together is nothing but a distant, blurred dream.

And now she's forgetting even those last traumatic moments. Giving her heart to another – how dare she? Her heart belongs to Daniel and Daniel alone. She couldn't honor his last wish, couldn't keep their baby safe for long enough to tell him about his father's love; now she can't honor her own promise to live each day of her life honoring his memory.

A couple officers smoking on the corner are staring at her and she realizes that she's practically convulsing. How nice it must be for them, calmly taking long drags from their cigarettes and staring at her like she's some kind of freak show.

She wishes they would drop dead on the spot.

No, she doesn't. She wishes they would offer her one.

She doesn't smoke.

She wishes she smoked. Sure, it would slowly kill her, but what would be the difference? Better to die from some physical ailment than whatever this is.

Is it possible to die from a broken heart?

"Regina?" Robin's voice says softly behind her, distracting her from her increasingly dark train of thought.

She turns her head toward the sound of his voice, eyes blank and unseeing. "I didn't remember," she whispers, disbelieving.

"Yeah, I figured that out pretty quickly. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," she says dismissively. "Everything is fine. Let's just get back to work." She tries to push herself up from her leaning post, tries to walk back into the station, but her knees buckle beneath her and Robin's arms swoop in, barely catching her before she hits the ground.

She doesn't want this embrace – she doesn't want *his* embrace – but what she wants is unattainable, so she leans against him and lets him hold her upright as the dark, sticky, self-loathing eats up her insides and blackens her heart.

She wonders if it's possible to rip the damn thing out of her chest so she won't have to feel this pain anymore.

"Do you want to go home?" Robin offers.

She laughs – a horrifyingly humorless laugh – and asks, "Go home to *what*?"

"Do you want to go back upstairs?"

"Give me a minute."

He gives her a minute – more like five – to compose herself before they walk back up to the squad room together, and she sits down at her desk and stares blankly at her computer screen for hours without doing anything.

No one says anything. She's not sure if that makes it better or worse.

xx

How Regina's feet end up taking her to the Lion Flower, she has no idea. Robin had invited her to stay the night at his place, but there was a slightly wary expression on his face and she had instantly known that he didn't want her around Roland. She doesn't want herself around Roland. Not tonight.

"Call me," he had whispered. "Seriously, call me. I don't care what time it is. If you need anything at all, even someone to curse out, I will have my phone next to me all night on the highest volume."

She had stiffly thanked him and walked out of the room without a second glance back. Because Robin is too good to her and the last thing she wants is to burden him further when this night is hard for him, too. It has to be; he and Daniel were close friends, if not best friends, and for some reason he'll never mention that in her presence, but she knows he's hurting, too. It's not fair to ask him to support her, too. It's not right.

Anyway, she's here because she can't go home and she can't run crying back to Emma's less than twelve hours after she left. She almost turns around, though, when she sees that the bar is empty except for one person: Mary Margaret Blanchard.

What the hell, she'll be drunk soon enough anyway, and it won't matter.

"Good evening, ADA Blanchard," she greets with a curt nod.

"Detective Mills, hi."

"What brings you here tonight...alone?" she asks disinterestedly, waving down the bartender to give her a glass of red wine. "Or are Nolan and Jones showing up in a few minutes?"

"Actually, no." Blanchard fidgets uneasily with her empty glass, eyes downcast. "David – Detective Nolan – just left. I just broke up with him."

Regina blinks several times, wondering if she misheard. "Pardon?"

"We broke up," Blanchard repeats impatiently.

"I'm sorry, I just wasn't aware that you were dating to begin with. I knew, of course, that he was harboring a rather intense schoolboy crush on you, but-"

"We were trying to keep it a secret. At work, at least. People would talk...actually, you're the only one I've told."

"Well, I'd promise to keep your secret, but it appears there is no longer a secret to be kept."

"No, there isn't," Blanchard agrees softly before clearing her throat and apologizing, "I'm sorry, Regina, I'm sure you didn't come here to listen to me complain about my lack of a love life."

"Actually," says Regina, taking a sip of the Lion Flower's low-quality Cabernet and grimacing, "I came here to forget about mine, so if you need to complain, I might as well listen."

Blanchard shrugs, eyes troubled, "I know what day today is, Regina. I...I'm sure you don't really want to talk to me. Not now."

Regina responds with a grunt.

"You should try another way to make yourself forget," the ADA continues. "Why aren't you at Emma's?"

"Emma's doctors have declared that she is no longer concussed, and as such, she no longer needs a permanent live-in caretaker," Regina says shortly.

"I know for a fact that you're more than that to her, and she's obviously so much more than a patient to you."

"Oh? And how, exactly, do you claim to know all of that?" Regina challenges, an angry sneer painted across her face in a vain attempt to

keep it from crumbling.

"Because I have eyes and ears, and contrary to what you might believe, I'm not a naïve teenager anymore."

It's too much. It's all too much.

"Enough about me," Regina growls. "Back to you. Nolan must have been heartbroken when you broke it off. He's been smitten with you for quite some time. As his coworker, I have to say I'd rather have him quietly dating you than loudly pining after you."

"Not me," Mary Margaret says bitterly. "He's smitten with ADA Blanchard."

Regina raises one eyebrow. "And are you not ADA Blanchard? Because that's what I've been calling you since we started working together."

"You know what I mean. He doesn't know me."

"You've been working with him for two years now, not to mention all the time you've spent together outside of it. I'd say he knows you fairly well."

Mary Margaret sighs. "Don't make me say it, Regina."

"Say it," she challenges. "Go ahead."

"He knows Mary Margaret Blanchard. He doesn't know Mary Margaret White."

The name causes her inhale sharply, but Regina congratulates herself on keeping composed, at least on the outside. "And you think he would turn away from you because of who your father is?" she asks.

"Wouldn't you?" Mary Margaret demands. "There was a time when you couldn't be in the same room as me without having a panic attack."

"The situations are hardly comparable," she mutters.

"Would you still feel the same way about Emma if she were the daughter of a serial killer?"

Regina sighs, downs the rest of her wine, and admits, "Yes, I probably would, because that's what love is."

"What David and I have isn't love, though. It's an infatuation."

"And you're still a foolish little girl," Regina spits. Blanchard's eyes fill with tears and Regina groans, disgusted with herself, because she really is trying not to do that anymore. Tonight is just...well, tonight isn't exactly Mary Margaret's favorite of the year, either. She forces herself to pat the younger woman awkwardly on the hand and says, "My PTSD was not your fault, Mary Margaret. You're not your father. Don't let him hold you back."

Mary Margaret stares up at her with a mix of shock and admiration and replies, "Thank you for finally acknowledging that. And you shouldn't let him hold *you* back, either. Don't let any of it hold you back."

Regina feels her lips begin to quiver, and she's not sure if the feeling threatening to fell her is sadness or rage, because on one hand, Blanchard is right, and on the other, she has absolutely no idea. She doesn't wait to find out – she slaps a ten dollar bill on the bar and starts storming out as the ADA calls after her, "Regina, wait! You shouldn't be driving. Let me take you home."

She whirls back around and screams, "I'm not going anywhere with you, and you shouldn't be driving either!" before hurling her keys at Mary Margaret's head. She misses.

She's halfway out the door when she realizes that, in fact, she *can't* drive home if Blanchard has her keys, but she's not going back in there to grovel at the idiotic woman's feet. It wasn't her finest moment, but she's not ready to apologize for it. Not yet.

Instead she crosses her arms tightly over her stomach and walks the three miles back to her apartment.

xx

She practically wears a trail in the carpet with her endless pacing. The half-empty bottle of whiskey on the coffee table stands in testament to hours of failed attempts to drink herself to sleep, or at least oblivion, but every time she closes her eyes, all she sees is a nightmare.

It's a familiar nightmare: her hands stained with blood and her voice sobbing the word "no" over and over, pleading with an unconscious figure to wake up, to stay with her.

Please don't leave me.

Sometimes the unconscious figure is Daniel; sometimes it's a baby, which isn't even a real image because she never actually held her baby. She never even saw him because someone determined it would be too upsetting for her, as if the situation weren't already upsetting. And sometimes, it's Emma.

And Emma *did* wake up, she reminds herself. Emma is awake.

Actually, Emma is most likely asleep right now, as any normal person would be at three in the morning, but she will be awake again at some point.

Because Emma is alive.

Still, maybe it's fear and maybe it's alcohol and maybe it's that deep, black pit of loneliness; she's not sure, but somehow her fingers are picking up her phone and tapping Emma's name on her contact list, and she feels like an idiot, but that doesn't stop her, because her slightly sluggish mind tells her she *needs* Emma right now. She needs her more than she's ever needed anyone or anything else, including, it seems, her dignity.

One ring.

Two, and then three.

Regina's heart is beginning to pound and she feels cold sweat springing to trembling palms when she finally hears a groggy voice murmur, "Hello?"

"Emma?" she breathes, the word falling from her lips so softly it's barely a flutter. A silent prayer of thanksgiving as every muscle in her body unclenches in relief.

"Regina? What are you – it's three A.M. Is everything okay?"

"I..."

I just wanted to hear your voice.

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright," she lies. "It's your first night home alone since the shooting. Just checking that you weren't having nightmares."

"I *was* sleeping like a baby," the younger woman complains. "But you obviously weren't, so I'll ask again: is everything okay?"

No, it's not, because every time I close my eyes I see you bleeding in my arms over and over again.

"I'm fine."

She hears a scoff at the other end, because of course Emma sees right through the blatant lie. Regina curses the armor around her heart that's nowhere near as strong as it used to be, crumbling with rust a little more each day since Emma Swan came into her life, and flits between anticipation and dread as she waits for the other woman's response.

"Do you want to come over?"

She glances at the whiskey bottle again and snorts, shaking her head before she realizes that Emma can't see her over the phone. "That's probably not the best idea," she mutters sadly. Even if she was in any condition to drive, her car has probably been towed at this point.

"Okay. Do you need me to go over there?"

Yes.

I need you.

I need you so badly.

"No, that's fine, dear," she says with a harsh, fake laugh. "Just go back to sleep. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

"Don't worry about it," Emma says kindly. "'Night, Regina."

"Goodnight, Emma," she whispers before practically throwing her phone on the coffee table and bursting into tears.

What the hell is wrong with her?

She's slept alone plenty of times before over the past eleven years. She's become so adept at managing her fear that she could practically write a handbook with all the tricks she's picked up. But suddenly, they're not enough. Nothing will ever be enough.

Maybe, she realizes as she sinks onto the sofa and takes a long swig of whiskey straight from the bottle, maybe it's never been enough. Maybe all this time, she's just been pretending, imagining solid ground under her feet when she's really been hanging off the side of a cliff.

Maybe it's time to just let herself fall.

She pours the rest of the whiskey down her throat, barely noticing the sting of the alcohol as she grasps the neck of the bottle and flings it at the bookshelf. It shatters with a loud crash and knocks over the small frame holding the last photograph ever taken of Daniel, the one from Robin's wedding. There's a second, smaller crash as the frame hits the floor and joins the pile of shards from the broken whiskey bottle, and it takes Regina a moment to realize what happened before she practically

dives across the room and fumbles to pick it up, ignoring the small pieces of glass embedding themselves in her palms.

A few droplets of liquor have gotten on the photo, distorting her own features as well as Robin's and Marian's, but she doesn't care because Daniel's beautiful, smiling face is unmarred. Even now, she can close her eyes and hear the sound of his laughter and feel his warm breath on the back of her neck as he sneaks around for a kiss, but the face she remembers is never this one, so joyful and full of life. She forces her eyes open before her last moment with Daniel, the one memory she knows will never leave her, can make its way, unwelcome, into her consciousness.

And then, chest heaving with loud, painful sobs, she allows her tears to stream onto the picture and admits in the darkest, quietest corner of her heart that what she misses most isn't just Daniel's smile, but her own. The smile of someone loved and wanted and accepted for every tangled and fraying thread that makes up the fabric of her being.

She's been kneeling before the photo for almost fifteen minutes when she hears a knock at the door, and as it slowly registers in her alcohol-addled mind, her pain and grief is replaced by almost paralyzing dread.

"Who is it?" she hiccups, pushing herself up from the living room floor on shaky legs and swiping a hand over her cheeks in a futile attempt to brush away an entire evening's worth of tear stains.

"Regina? It's Emma. Can I come in?"

Emma? There's something, a sensation deep in her belly, almost like hope, that alights when she hears her partner's unmistakable voice, even as her hand wraps around her gun that's just been returned to her and she sidesteps unsteadily toward the front door and peers through the peephole, breath caught in her throat as it dawns on her that this is, indeed, real, and a pajama-clad Emma Swan is standing outside of her apartment.

Hands trembling so hard she nearly drops the weapon, she unbolts each of the locks on the door slowly before pulling it open and staring, transfixed, at the sight before her.

"Regina?" the younger woman's confused voice calls her back to reality. "May I come in?"

Regina struggles to force the words out of her unwilling throat. "Yes, of course," she finally husks, stepping aside so Emma can enter the apartment.

She stumbles, and Emma's beautiful eyes narrow, taking in her hazy, unfocused gaze and wrinkled suit and the shattered remnants of whiskey bottle and picture frame littering the floor. "Are you drunk?" Emma demands.

"I..."

She is quite drunk, she realizes as she attempts to strike a carefree pose and instead lurches forward into the younger detective's waiting arms. Emma winces, and Regina remembers with gut-wrenching clarity that her partner has a still-healing fracture in her shoulder and isn't supposed to be supporting the weight of a grown woman.

"I'm sorry; I'm so sorry," she whispers, clutching the doorframe and trying her best to pull herself away before she causes any lasting damage to the other woman's injuries, but Emma holds firm, pulling a squirming Regina closer against her chest and running soothing fingers through mussed and dirty brown hair.

"It's okay," she says softly. "Everything is okay." And she continues repeating the phrase until Regina has finally given in and relaxed into her embrace.

"You came," Regina exhales, head pressed against Emma's chest to hear the heart beating strongly within it.

"Yeah, I did. I might have gotten your address from Locksley. I hope that's not an invasion of privacy or anything. He told me what day it is – Regina, why didn't you call me? Or stay at my place another night?"

Regina doesn't reply – neither her brain nor her mouth is working well enough to answer the question.

Emma sighs. "Anyway, you sounded like you might need some company. So, I'm here."

Dozens of different emotions flicker through her mind in bits and pieces. Horror. Gratitude. Relief. Adoration. But she's too drunk and confused and exhausted to form any of them into a coherent thought, so she simply repeats again, "You came."

And a few moments later, "I think I'm going to be sick."

But even as she rushes to the bathroom, stomach lurching, she can't help smile slightly as Emma's words play back over and over inside her head.

I'm here.

xx

Life has interesting ways of working itself out, Emma muses, rubbing small circles on Regina's back as the other woman kneels over the toilet bowl and spews out the entire contents of her stomach – which seems to be about ninety-nine percent whiskey. It seems fitting that after Regina

spent so many weeks caring for her after the shooting that she should return the favor for at least one night.

Especially since that very same shooting seems to be at least part of the reason for the drunken mess before her.

Regina finally stops vomiting for long enough to take a deep breath and rock back onto her heels. "How are you feeling?" Emma asks sympathetically, hand never wavering from its circular pattern.

"Like shit," Regina moans. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"Well, according to my neurologist, lack of sleep can impair your cognitive functioning," Emma points out, sneaking a glance at the clock on her phone. Three-forty. Shit.

"I always have trouble sleeping," Regina admits, eyes filling with tears again. "That's what the whiskey is for." Emma nods in understanding and notes to herself that her partner is much more open when she's drunk.

She's also much more receptive to comfort, she thinks as she instinctively slides her arms around Regina's waist and the other woman immediately leans into the contact instead of momentarily stiffening like she always does when she's sober.

"We should probably try to get you some sleep then," Emma suggests, trying to keep her voice light. "Preferably without the alcohol because I don't want all my coworkers to die from liver damage before I can even get back to work."

No response. She supposes she can't expect Regina to appreciate her humor at this point. "Tea? Bubble bath?" she suggests. "Bubble bath and then tea?"

Regina shrugs her shoulders noncommittally. "Nothing works," she whispers.

"Bubble bath and then tea and then I'll swaddle you, infant-style, in a really thick blanket and read you a bedtime story? Bedtime stories have had almost a one-hundred percent success rate with my other customers."

"Henry? He's ten."

Emma ignores her and continues. "And then I'm going to sit and watch over you all night so no monsters will try to attack you. And I'm pretty decent at protecting people. I *am* a cop, you know."

Regina tries to laugh, but her smile falters and she whispers, "I'm fine, Emma. I don't need you to protect me, and you need to take care of yourself first."

"I'm not leaving you," Emma says reassuringly, pulling the other woman closer and wondering, not for the first time, if she should admit to the things she discussed with Mary Margaret and Cora. But she decides not here, and not now, because now Regina is leaning against her shoulder and staring up at her with eyes clouded with inebriation and exhaustion but still bright with trust and other emotions she's too terrified to try to decipher. Tonight isn't about her. "Let's get that bubble bath started."

She perches on the rim of the tub as she fills it with water and soap. Regina is still kneeling next to the toilet, looking queasy and out-of-it but staring at Emma like she's her own personal savior. "You didn't have to come," she says dully. "You shouldn't have come."

"If I had been the one who called you, would you have come?" Emma questions.

Regina doesn't answer, but her eyes say "yes" so clearly that she doesn't have to.

The two women sit in silence while the tub fills, until Emma fills it with soap and turns off the water. "Temperature okay?" she asks Regina, who sticks her hand in and nods.

"Okay, great," she says, standing stiffly and stretching her shoulder. "I'll just be out here, until you-"

"No!" Regina suddenly exclaims.

"No?"

"No, don't...you said you wouldn't leave me," she falters.

"Okay, I won't," Emma agrees instantly, sitting back down. She mostly averts her eyes when Regina undresses, but she sees enough to observe that the other woman shields herself strangely. Most women she's seen getting naked, if they felt a need to cover themselves, tended to either cover their breasts or between their legs. Regina's hands are over her stomach. As she gets in the tub, Emma notices the huge scar that stretches all the way across her abdomen.

White, she thinks angrily. The very idea of what he'd done to her partner, right here in this very apartment, makes her stomach churn, but she forces it from her mind because they can't both throw up.

Regina sinks down into the water and hugs her knees to her chest, her entire body shaking with harsh sobs, and Emma lightly massages her shoulders and wonders if any of this could be considered relaxing.

It's going to be a long night.

xx

When the water eventually gets cold, Regina has stopped crying, but she's so exhausted she can barely stand on her feet long enough to dry off and put on pajamas. Ever so gently, Emma lowers her onto the couch and drapes a blanket over her shoulders. She jogs into the kitchen to get the tea, but by the time she returns, Regina has already curled into a ball again, and is not in a position to hold anything.

"This'll be here, if you get thirsty," Emma says, placing it on the coffee table. Then she quickly scans the room and spots the broken glass littering the floor under the bookshelf. The last thing they need is someone getting glass embedded in their feet tonight. "Hey, I should probably clean that up," she tells Regina. "Do you have a broom?"

"Closet," Regina mutters, jerkily nodding her head to a door on the right.

Emma finds it (Regina flinches as she opens the closet door) and hums to herself as she starts sweeping. Her shoulder is beginning to ache, but the movement makes her feel calmer, like she can actually think clearly for a moment and decide what to do next.

Regina is definitely good at destroying things, she thinks to herself, amazed at the sheer amount of glass shards littering the floor. She sees an old photograph lying face-down and bends over to rescue it before it accidentally gets swept into the trashcan or stained even further with liquor.

It's a wedding photo. Strangely enough, the first person she recognizes is the bride – Marian Locksley. There'd been a picture of her in the BPD newsletter when she'd died. Emma had never met her, but she was almost as much of a legend as Regina. Then the man beside her, Emma deduces, must be Robin Locksley, but he looks so much younger and happier that it's difficult to associate him with the lieutenant she's come to know.

On her other side is Regina, whom she also barely recognizes. She's smiling and very pregnant. This must have been taken just before the White incident then, so eleven years ago. That would put Regina in her early thirties at the time, but she could easily pass for her early twenties in this picture. And then the man with his arms around her is –

No. He couldn't be.

Oh yes, he could, Emma thinks as she examines the photo more closely and a million little details she thought she'd forgotten come rushing back.

Emma gasps, and she feels like her brain is short-circuiting; a wave of dizziness overtakes her and she braces herself against the bookcase, two thoughts running frantically through her mind:

How the hell did she not figure it out sooner?

How the hell is she going to tell Regina?

It's the latter that mostly occupies her as she vaguely hears Regina call out, "Emma?" and an instant later, the woman who could barely hold herself upright only five minutes ago has her arms around Emma has is supporting her weight so she won't collapse on into the pile of broken glass beneath her feet.

"It's alright, Emma," Regina whispers. "I've got you. Take deep breaths, okay?"

Regina's blanket is still over her shoulders, and she wraps it around both of them as she counts out breaths for Emma. It seems to be working; slowly but surely, Emma feels the room stop spinning around her, but all she can think is that she can't do this. She shouldn't be relying on Regina for comfort, not tonight – not when Regina is the one who likely needs it (and deserves it) more. The brunette doesn't look any steadier on her feet than Emma feels, and if she found out the reason for Emma's sudden panic, she'd probably be even less so.

"You're alright," Regina soothes.

"Yeah, I am," Emma chokes out, straightening her back.

"Do you...do you want to talk about whatever that was?"

"Nothing – it was nothing. Just forget it," Emma says gruffly.

Regina looks hurt for a moment before shaking it off and tenderly wiping away one of the tears that Emma hadn't realized was leaking out of her eyes. "Emma, you can tell me," she insists.

This time, Emma is fully aware of the fact that her eyes are swimming with tears. She has to tell Regina. There is no option but to tell Regina. The problem is that she has absolutely no idea how the other woman will react.

"Sit," she directs. If they're going to have this conversation, then neither of them can be in the position of having to physically support the other.

Regina nods and steers them toward the sofa. She carefully props Emma up on a stack of pillows – and Emma once again feels guilty for letting Regina take care of her when tonight was supposed to be about the opposite – before curling into a ball at her side and wrapping her blanket around both of their shoulders. Then she reaches out for Emma's hand and starts stroking her knuckles. "Tell me," she coaxes.

"I..."

Emma sucks in a deep breath and shows Regina the picture. Here goes nothing. "This guy – he was your fiancé, right?"

Regina nods slowly as her hand disconnects from Emma's and reverently touches his face. "Daniel," she murmurs.

"Here's the thing," Emma says hesitantly. "I kind of...know him. Knew him."

Regina blinks once.

And then twice.

"Okay," she says. "How?"

"I...um...he kind of stopped me from jumping off a bridge when I was seventeen," Emma explains. "He's...I told you the story about the cop who saved my life. I never actually knew his name, but...that's him."

Regina nods and says, "Oh."

She's taking this remarkably well, Emma thinks, but maybe she hasn't processed all of it yet.

Another blink, and then another.

Suddenly, a tiny wail escapes from her throat, and she buries her face in her hands. Here it is, Emma thinks, extracting her good arm from the blanket to rub Regina's back. "Oh god, Regina, I'm so sorry."

That causes the other woman's tears to stop, at least for a second, as she looks up in confusion. "Why?

Emma shakes her head. "I don't know. I just...today is a shitty day for you, and now I'm dumping all this stuff on you and reminding you, and...and I'm just so sorry you lost him," she finishes. "Daniel. He was a great guy."

"Yes, he was," Regina whispers, taking the photo out of Emma's hands and gazing longingly at his face. "I miss him so much," she admits as she starts to cry again. Emma nods and wordlessly wraps her arms around Regina. She wishes, more than anything, that she knew something to say that would make any of this better, but she doesn't, so she just holds Regina and lets her cry.

She's not sure how long they've been cuddled together – it could be five minutes, could be half an hour – when Regina's sobs gradually quiet and she whispers, "Thank you."

"For what? I didn't do anything."

"For...for saying that. About Daniel. For...for not being afraid to talk to me about him. Everyone else..." She starts crying again and Emma's heart aches for her as she imagines what it must be like to have people treading so lightly around you that "he was a great guy" is the most acknowledgment you ever get for losing the love of your life.

"Do you want to tell me about him?" Emma offers. "I mean, if it's not too painful for you. I only knew him for about half an hour, but he was a fairly important person in my life, and I never really got a chance to pay my respects."

Regina swallows and nods, burying her face in Emma's shoulder for another minute before slowly pushing herself up and gesturing for Emma to follow her into the bedroom.

How much whiskey did you drink tonight? Emma wonders, reaching out to steady her partner as she wobbles slightly on her feet attempting to retrieve a large box from the top of a bookshelf. She places it on top of the bed and opens it, and inside, Emma sees dozens of old photos and mementos. A badge cover reading "Officer Daniel Reeves." Pictures of the happy young couple: in their police uniforms, cooking in matching aprons, splashing each other on the beach. There are a few of Regina's baby bump that Emma needs to avert her eyes from.

Some of them are of the Locksleys, too, but most are just Daniel and Regina. Emma's favorite is probably the one where Daniel is carrying Regina into the ocean and threatening to throw her under a wave. They're both laughing hysterically, wearing identical expressions of sheer bliss unlike anything Emma has seen on her partner's face before. It also doesn't hurt that they both look amazing in their swimsuits.

"Pretty good-looking guy," Emma remarks, because it looks like Regina is expecting her to say something and she can't come up with anything better. "You had solid taste."

Regina smiles wryly through her tears, cheeks flushing slightly pink. "Thank you, dear. But why do you sound so surprised about that? You met him, after all."

"Yeah, but I kind of had other things on my mind during the thirty-or-so minutes we knew each other. Anyway, he wasn't wearing *that*." *And neither were you*, she adds internally, but now is not really the time for such remarks.

"Point taken," Regina concedes, staring down into the box. Her watery eyes are filled with a tragic mixture of fondness and longing, and she heaves a shaky sigh as she sits down heavily on the bed. "So, what did you want to talk about?" she asks.

Emma shrugs. "I don't know. I thought you were going to do the talking. He's your fiancé." Tonight is about Regina's closure, not hers, though if that happens to be a side effect, she won't be opposed.

"I don't even know where to begin," says Regina, staring helplessly at her hands. "I...I just have no idea. I never talk about him."

"Maybe you could tell me some stories about him?" Emma suggests, sitting down next to Regina on the bed and draping an arm over her shoulders. "Like...how did you meet him?"

Regina leans into Emma's neck and breathes in and out slowly a few times.

"I was twenty," she finally whispers. "It was the summer before my junior year at Wellesley, and I stayed in Boston for the summer, working as an intern for my mother's firm. At her suggestion. It was horribly boring and probably the main reason I'm so good at filling out paperwork now, but at the time it was a better option for me than returning to Storybrooke. I had a paycheck, my own apartment..."

She trails off and stares at the picture in her hand once again, her eyes misting over and her lips trembling.

"I met Daniel one morning while I was out running," she continues softly. "We started talking. He was training to get in shape for the Police Academy, which I was also trying to do as well, although I certainly hadn't told my mother about that yet. So, we became...workout buddies, as you would probably say."

Emma grins.

"Anyway, at the end of the summer, he asked me on a date, and the rest..."

There's a moment of silence – bittersweet but comfortable - before Emma asks playfully, "Tell me about your first kiss? Was it magical?"

Regina nods and blushes in an almost girlish way. "It was. It was after our first date, and we were walking home in the rain, which sounds perfectly cliché now, but at the time, for me, it was... I was a bit of a late bloomer," she confesses. "It was actually...he was my first. My first kiss, my first boyfriend, my first everything."

She stares down at her hands like she's worried about being judged. Emma whistles. This is all making so much more sense now. "Wow. I mean, I knew he was special, but...damn."

"I loved him," Regina whispers, "so much."

"And from what I observed during our one encounter, he felt pretty strongly about you, too."

Regina pulls a blue crocheted blanket from the bottom of the box and presses it to her cheek. (It has an H embroidered in the corner and Emma remembers with a sickening thud the other elephant in the room that has yet to be addressed.)

"He always knew what to say," Regina murmurs. "I was constantly anxious about something, and he always knew how to make it alright."

Emma hums in agreement. That was definitely something she had observed, as well.

"He knew that I was very cautious when it came to relationships, and he always respected that. He never pushed me to move faster than I wanted to. It took almost four years and shoves from a few friends for me to agree to marry him, and even then..." She sighs and looks disgusted with herself. "We were engaged and expecting a baby and I still couldn't even set a date for the wedding. I just...I could never...I was always so uncertain, about *everything*," she finally spits out. "And then I lost him."

"I don't think those two things are related," Emma says sympathetically. "And I don't think he minded. That's one of the things he told me, actually: that it's normal to be afraid about the future."

"And it turns out I was right to be afraid," Regina mutters angrily. Her eyes start to tear up again, but she presses her face into Emma's shoulder before they can fall.

"Yeah, you were," Emma agrees sadly, shaking her head in despair at the idea that the wonderful man who had saved her, who she'd known beyond a shadow of doubt would be the most amazing dad and husband, had never gotten the chance to be either, and the woman he had adored and wanted the world for had instead had her entire life destroyed by a monster in one horrible evening.

"Emma?" Regina asks softly.

"Yeah?"

"Could...could you please tell me about when you met him? I – if it's not too painful. I know it was a dark time, but-"

"Of course," Emma interrupts. "It's not – I mean, yeah, there were a few dark moments, but there's a happy endings. Obviously. For me, I mean," she adds uncomfortably.

She scoots up to lean against the headboard and motions for Regina to join her. "It's not story time without cuddling," she explains.

A ghost of a smile crosses Regina's lips and she crawls into Emma's waiting arms, pulling her quilt and the pale blue baby blanket over their legs. "This will have to do for swaddling," she tries to joke.

"Once upon a time," Emma begins softly, "there was a seventeen year old girl named Emma Swan. Otherwise known as me. I had run away from my foster parents and was living with this guy named Neal that I'd known from an old group home. You probably know him better as Henry's dad. Basically, I was a huge mess. Everything in my life pretty much felt hopeless."

"I'm so sorry," Regina murmurs.

"Hey, it's not your fault."

"I know, I just...it hurts me to think about you going through that. Feeling hopeless," Regina admits. "It's not enjoyable."

"Don't worry about it," Emma says quickly. "It's behind me now. Anyway, one night, Neal and I kind of...had sex. Only one time, and it made me realize that I was definitely one hundred percent gay, but even so, I ended up getting pregnant, and just...well, when Daniel met me, I was standing on the edge of a bridge ready to throw it all away into the Charles River Basin."

Regina inhales sharply and hold Emma tighter, as if her embrace can somehow protect both of them from the pain of the past.

"But I didn't," she continues, "because he stopped me."

xx

Regina rests her head on Emma's chest as they curl together on her bed. The blankets have been pushed aside, and photos of Daniel are spread

everywhere, photos she hasn't been able to look at in years without crying. But now she's got Emma's arms around her and Emma's sweet voice whispering stories in her ear, and despite the pounding in her head, she feels so contented, so utterly safe and secure, that even the sadness in her heart and the tears rolling down her cheeks feel like comfortable parts of her.

"So, then," Emma is saying, "he accused me of assaulting him and handcuffed me to the bridge so I wouldn't jump. Then, he used the promise of donuts to lure me back to his car." She laughs lightly at that. "He actually gave me my red leather jacket, the one you hated so much on the first day. I guess you hated it then, too, because he said you had gotten it for your birthday and immediately put it in the Goodwill bag."

Regina thinks she vaguely remembers that. She has no recollection of who had given her that jacket, but she does remember thoroughly despising it. *Red* leather, of all things. She means to chuckle, but it comes out as something between a squeak and a cough.

Emma's hand rubs her back, moving in slow, uniform circles. "Then he gave me basically the most important pep talk of my life," she explains. "He said that I could be a good parent and talk to Neal about everything, and that everything would be fine. And it was."

Regina's only reply is a soft whimper and more tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I guess I kind of stole your baby name," Emma suddenly realizes. "I'm sorry about that, if that's why you got so weird about it whenever I talked about Henry at first. It's just...I actually wanted to name my baby after that cop – Daniel – but he never told me his name, for some reason. But I remembered that he had said the name Henry, so...I went with that."

There's probably something profound that should be said here, but Regina can't think of it. "It suits him well," she finally husks. "I'm sure Daniel would have been honored." *And I am, too,* she thinks, but she's crying too hard to continue. Emma nods and buries her face in Regina's hair, letting out a quiet sob of her own, and their tears mingle together as they hold each other tightly, so connected for the moment that they feel as one.

Everything hurts, and yet for once, nothing hurts, Regina thinks as she reaches one hand up to tenderly cup Emma's cheek.

Everything will be fine, I promise. Daniel's favorite mantra comes into her head as a tiny, involuntary smile sneaks its way across her lips. Daniel and his relentless optimism. She'd spent years after his death cursing him for it, railing against him for filling her with false hope, for raising her spirits so high that the eventual crash was all the more painful. *"Everything is not fine!"* she'd screamed at his gravestone, lying prone on the ground and sobbing into the unsympathetic grass. Now, she wonders if perhaps he had been right all along.

After all, she's still here, and Emma's here, and she's still a little drunk and still misses him like hell, and she's pretty sure Emma's shoulder

isn't doing so well after holding her for so long, but in this moment, everything *is* fine.

Regina tilts her head up and stares into Emma's glistening eyes and thinks about how much her life has changed since this amazing and fascinating woman came into it. She's surprised – or maybe she's not – that it was Daniel who was ultimately responsible for keeping Emma Swan, not to mention her son, in the world. That it's thanks to him that all of this is possible.

That even though he's not here anymore, he'd somehow found a way to ensure she'd be okay in his absence.

"What are you thinking about," Emma asks gently, smiling through her tears.

"I want to believe," she remembers herself telling Daniel, and he'd replied, *"Someday you will."*

Maybe, she thinks, as she looks at Emma Swan and all of her beautiful strength and equally beautiful vulnerability, and Emma looks at her and truly sees her, every broken and damaged inch of her and doesn't turn away, she does believe.

Everything is fine and nothing hurts and she believes.

Hands still caressing Emma's cheeks, Regina lifts her head and scoots up so their faces are level with each other.

"I'm thinking about you," she replies.

Then she leans in and kisses her.

It's quick and chaste and light as a feather, in the split second before she pulls away, terrified, it's everything. It's all her hopes and fears and her love and everything else she doesn't have the words to describe.

She holds her breath and watches for Emma's reaction. She looks strangely amused, and Regina is seconds away from bolting – though where the hell she'd go, she has no idea; this is her home – when Emma pulls her back in and presses their lips together for a second time.

And maybe she's crazy, or maybe the drunkenness and exhaustion are getting the better of her, but just before she lets her eyes flutter shut, Regina swears she can see a golden light shining outward from both of their bodies, and it's glowing and it's radiant and it fills her entire being with warmth, soothing her very soul as it heals each and every crack in her heart until what remains is strong and whole.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Thank you very much for all of your incredibly kind comments. They mean the world to me!

Regina awakens to sunlight streaming in through the window and her head pounding, and looks around in confusion. She's in her bedroom, which is strange enough in itself – she doesn't even remember the last time she slept there - and she feels vaguely cold and empty, as if someone had been holding her and then stopped. Maybe it was one of her nicer dreams about Daniel, but she usually has *some* recollection of those.

She sees the wrinkled sheets and realizes it's not a figment of her imagination: someone had definitely been in bed with her last night. She feels her pulse quicken and she's about to have to start her breathing exercises when she remembers.

Emma.

She remembers that Emma was here, and Emma had held her, and they had talked about Daniel and they had kissed, and these are not things she has the energy to deal with right now. The dull pounding in her head has

turned into a jackhammer, and her chest is so tight she's worried her lungs are about to be crushed.

In. Out.

She is an adult who can handle the aftermath of a few kisses.

A few more deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, and she thinks she smells something vaguely pleasant and calming. She follows her nose to the kitchen (her stomach lurches as she stands up), and sees a pot of coffee brewing and Emma Swan standing over a frying pan at her stove, humming to herself as she stirs some kind of eggy concoction with Regina's good spatula.

It's the same Emma, the very same woman she's worked with for the past few months. Nothing is different, and yet everything feels different in a way that makes Regina's breath catch in her throat. She stands, stock still, for a moment, watching Emma fondly but nervously before she finally finds her voice and asks, "What are you doing?"

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," Emma says with an altogether too bright smile. "Coffee?" She quickly shoves a mug at Regina and comments, "You look like you need it."

Regina accepts it with a hum of gratitude. She's sure she looks terrible; hangovers have never gone well for her.

"Oh, and I'm making a frittata."

A frittata?

"You can cook?"

"I can put eggs and cheese together in a pan. It's not exactly rocket science."

Regina narrows her eyes in suspicion. "You never cooked anything when I was at your apartment."

"Well, I'm not as good at it as you are, as Henry so kindly informed me, and I seem to remember that *someone* would barely let me stand up on my own."

"I may have been a bit overprotective," Regina admits, sighing contentedly as she takes a sip of coffee. "You did a good job on this, at least."

"Thanks. Good old-fashioned Dunkin' Donuts blend."

Silence follows. It's comfortable and safe and entirely awkward at the same time.

"I kissed you last night," Regina says abruptly, in a whisper that feels like a scream.

"Yes, you did," Emma agrees. "And then I kissed you back."

"I...I'm sorry," Regina blurts out.

Emma looks up, confused. "Why?" she asks. "I liked it."

Regina had known that, of course, but to actually hear it from Emma's own lips is a huge relief. She still can't quite bring herself to believe that last night wasn't just an amazing dream, that Emma is really here making her breakfast and she's not passed out alone on her couch.

And if it *was* real, that begs the utterly terrifying question: what's next?

"You did?"

"Yeah," Emma says with a slight eye roll, "that was kind of implied by the whole kissing you back part."

"Yes, I realize that," Regina snaps, before quickly deflating and hanging her head. This isn't going to work if she keeps having unnecessarily hostile reactions. "I just – what did it mean?"

Emma shrugs. "I'm not sure."

"And you...you're okay with that?"

She shrugs again. "I don't know. I mean, it felt good, didn't it? It made me happy, and it seemed like it made you happy, too. For now, that's enough for me. So, yeah, I guess I am. Are you?"

Regina sighs and runs a trembling hand through her hair. "I...I'm not sure," she confesses in the smallest of whispers. "I haven't been sure of anything for a very long time."

Emma considers for a moment and seems to accept that, for the moment anyway, she's been thrust into the leadership role of whatever this partnership has become. "Okay," she says slowly.

"Okay?"

"We'll talk about it tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, we'll take today to think about...*this,* whatever this is. Whatever we want it to be, I guess. We'll write some notes and conversation points and all that crazy adult stuff we're supposed to know how to do, and then tonight we'll eat dinner and talk this whole thing through. Sound good?"

"I...yes, that sounds good," Regina agrees, forcing a smile to hide the panic that's quickly rising in her chest. Talking is good, she thinks. But in order to talk, she has to know that she wants to say.

"Good." Very efficiently for someone with only one fully-functioning arm, Emma dishes up two slices of frittata and hands Regina a plate. "Eat up. I have a PT appointment soon, and you've got to get to the station.

Regina glances at the clock and inhales sharply. It's already eleven.

"I called Locksley and told him you were on afternoon duty today. He totally understood, so don't worry."

Of course he understood, Regina thinks with a sigh. *How humiliating*. She gives Emma a tight-lipped smile, forces down about two bites of frittata (it's tasty enough, but her stomach is churning and she can't quite

bring herself to put anything in it right now), and mutters, "Thanks," before quickly walking to her bedroom to change into work clothes.

"Hey, Regina," Emma calls after her. "Whatever this is, this thing between us? I think it's a good thing."

Her eyes are so wide, so earnest, her face so open and beautiful that Regina wants to kiss her again, right then and there, but she can't.

"I think so, too," she says softly, before turning on her heel and retreating behind her closed door.

Her "Daniel box" is open in the middle of the floor and photographs are strewn everywhere on the bed, and for a second she considers crawling back under the covers because it's all too overwhelming to even consider. But then she carefully averts her eyes, puts her clothes on, and considers how best to ask Emma to drive her to the station because she has no idea where her car might be.

She's not quite sure how she's going to make it until dinner.

xx

Locksley meets her at the door to the station, mouth set in a firm line and eyes grim. "No," he says instead of a greeting.

"No?"

"Don't go in there," he warns. "Random evaluation day. The commissioner and some pricks from IAB are in there. Odds are you'll get pulled in for a psych exam or something."

Regina huffs out a frustrated burst of air. They insist on doing these things from time to time, and it's always terrible. And of course it had to happen today, of all days. "Won't it be worse if I'm not there at all?"

"There's a stomach bug going around. I told them you had it."

"Robin, I-"

"Look, don't even bother telling me you're fine, because I know that you're not. If you want, I'll call you as soon as they leave, but I don't want you to have to face this today, alright?"

"It's not your job to decide what I can and can't face," Regina protests angrily.

Robin looks pained, but determined. "Hopper agrees. You can ask him, if you want."

"Where am I supposed to go?" she asks, feeling utterly defeated. "Home? I don't..."

Emma's already driven off to her PT appointment; they have plans to meet at six, and the thought of calling earlier, before she knows what she wants to say to the younger woman regarding last night, causes her a considerable amount of distress. Her car is...well, she has no idea. She supposes she could take the T, or a cab, but to *where*?

"Regina, are you going to be okay?" Robin asks desperately. "I could-"

"I'm fine," she grits out. "I just...I'll be going now. Thank you for the warning."

His eyes are huge with concern, and she has to look away. "Just...take care of yourself, okay?" he says, rubbing her upper arm. "And promise me you'll call if you need me. Or Emma. It sounds like she was there when you needed her last night."

You have no idea, she thinks. And she has no idea how to explain it to him.

"She...I...yes." Without knowing what she's doing – she wonders if her blood alcohol content is still elevated from last night and that's what's making her feel so out of control – she throws her arms around him and whispers, "Robin, I love you. You're the best friend I've ever had. You know that, right?"

"Um..."

"And, just...you know that Daniel did, too. And he would have been really proud of you for raising Roland and making lieutenant and all of that."

"I...okay? Thanks," he says awkwardly. "Where is this coming from?" He's trying to act aloof, but his eyes are watering and it makes her start to cry again, too.

"I just wanted you to know," she murmurs through her tears.

"Well, thank you. For what it's worth, I think he'd be proud of you, too." He gives her a tight hug and sarcastically adds, "Thanks a lot for making me cry right before my meeting with the brass. I really appreciate it."

She sniffles and playfully punches his shoulder. "Knock 'em dead," she teases. "Except not really, because I'd hate having to visit you in prison."

He cocks his head to one side and stares at her for almost a full minute, like he can't quite figure out what's different. Then he shrugs and walks back inside, leaving Regina to her own devices on the sidewalk.

She wonders if she's brave enough to do the thing she probably has to do.

Well, last night, she had been brave enough to kiss Emma Swan. It had taken an entire bottle of whiskey to get to that point, but maybe there's still enough of it in her system to take care of one more thing. She can only hope.

It's a three-block walk to the District Attorney's office, but it seems so much longer when he mind is trying to talk her out of every step.

She briefly considers that Blanchard may not even be in the office – she has at least three ongoing cases that Regina knows of – but alas she's there.

"Hi, Regina," she says in a vaguely apologetic tone. "I have your keys."

"How did you know that's why I was here?" Regina asks sarcastically.

"Your car's parked in the lot out back. I hope it's okay that I drove it to work this morning – I got it washed and filled up the tank, so-"

"You did what?"

"I'm sorry, I-"

"No, no," Regina says quickly, shaking her head vigorously to clear the haze in her mind (which only makes the pounding worse), "I didn't – I meant to say thank you. That was...very kind of you. Saving me from being towed would have been enough...more than enough."

Mary Margaret looks down at her feet, cheeks flushed. "Well, I figured I was at least partially responsible for the whole storming-out-and-throwing-keys incident, so...I may have owed you an apology."

Regina tugs uncomfortably at her engagement ring. "My memory of last night has some parts that are slightly foggy, but I seem to recall that I might owe you one, as well."

"You don't," Mary Margaret insists, adamantly shaking her head. "I...I shouldn't have...it wasn't my place. I should have realized by now that you know what you're doing with your life."

I know what I'm doing? Regina laughs. She laughs and laughs uncontrollably until she's not sure whether she's laughing or crying, and Blanchard looks concerned.

"Regina, are you alright?" the ADA asks.

Struggling to regain control, Regina shrugs her shoulders and tries to nod. "I'm fine," she chokes. "Everything will be fine."

"Okay, if you say so," Blanchard mutters, reluctantly handing Regina the keys. "Don't – I mean, if you need me to look after your car for one more day, I can."

"Don't be silly, Miss Blanchard," dismisses Regina, composure restored at least on the outside. "There are murderers to lock up and injured baby birds to rescue. I should not be one of your concerns."

Mary Margaret rolls her eyes. "Have a nice day, Regina," she sighs.

Regina is almost at the door before she abruptly stops and turns to face the ADA one more time.

"Mary Margaret," she asks tentatively, "do you believe in happy endings?"

Blanchard thinks hard before shaking her head. "I don't know," she admits with a sad smile, "but I think believing in even the possibility of one can be a very powerful thing. Does that make any sense?"

"I think it does," Regina nods. "Goodbye, ADA Blanchard."

It had been easy, she thinks as she walks out the door, to believe in the possibility of a happy ending when the image of its realization had been right there in front of her: the path apparent like a glowing trail written in the stars, leading straight to Emma Swan's lips. It had been easy when she was too drunk and exhausted and emotionally spent to register the fear that has dictated every move she's made for the past eleven years.

When she could pretend for an instant that fate and destiny had turned her life into a beautiful fairytale in which she was the damsel in distress (or perhaps an Evil Queen, lost to darkness) and Emma was her White Knight in shining armor.

It's much harder now that the real world is right here, reminding her that she's Regina Mills, homicide detective, living in a time and place where there are so many people in distress with no one to save them. A world where people can live happily, but it's not ever after.

She can't go home – can't face the ghosts of the past, some pleasant, some less so, creeping out of every corner and reminding her that nothing lasts forever. She can't face the ghosts of the beautiful future

she'd allowed herself to imagine for the one brave moment when she'd allowed herself to believe that a happy ending was possible.

No, if she's going to be able to deal with this situation, she needs to go to a place where someone with no imagination will force her to live in the moment and accept reality.

It's probably going to hurt.

But what doesn't?

xx

"Your range of motion is looking good," Emma's new physical therapist declares. "We just need to work on getting that left shoulder back up to full strength."

He sends her to buy a medicine ball and a set of hand weights and gives her a list of exercises to do every day until their next appointment on Monday.

Emma sits in her car – it feels strange, but liberating, to be able to drive again – and considers her next move. There's a notepad in the passenger seat, waiting to house her convoluted thoughts about this *thing* with Regina, but there's one important conversation she needs to have before she can address them.

She knows how she feels about Regina; she knows Regina feels at least similarly about her, if not exactly the same. She's never felt this way before, about anyone – she's never allowed herself to let someone in far enough to even imagine feelings of this depth. She's never allowed herself to imagine a future with someone by her side, for one very important reason.

She checks the time on her phone and sighs. Neal is probably driving Henry up to his camp in the Adirondacks right now. They may or may not have service right now, but she has to at least try before he's in his cabin with no phone for a month.

It's ringing, and ringing.

Finally, Neal picks up.

"Hey, Em, we're driving now. What's up?"

"I was hoping to talk to Henry for a minute. Is that okay?"

She hears Henry's voice in the background asking, "Is that Mom?" and Neal says, "Yeah, sure."

Ten seconds later, Henry's on. "How's it going, Mom?" he exclaims.

"Hey, kid, you're on your way up to camp now, right?"

"Yeah, it's even longer than the drive to Boston," he grumbles. "But there's going to be horses, just like at Regina's house."

"So I've heard." Emma clears her throat nervously. "Listen, speaking of Regina, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Okay!" He sounds excited. Too excited.

"Now, I don't want you to make this more than it really is," Emma says carefully. Henry likes Regina even more than she does. "Regina and I...we're partners, right? And friends. You know that – she's friends with both of us. And you know we've been getting pretty close lately, and...well, something happened. And I think we're going to talk about maybe becoming...more. More than friends."

He's silent. God, she sucks at this. She's never talked to Henry about her relationships before – she's never had one to talk about – but she never imagined it would be *this* hard. He loves Regina, though. Doesn't he?

"Nothing is set in stone," she adds quickly. "I don't even know for sure what she wants, so if you're not okay with this-"

"No," Henry interrupts.

Emma thinks she feels her heart stop beating for an instant. She hadn't realized up until this moment – or at least she hadn't admitted – just how desperately she'd wanted him to say yes. "No?" Well, that's okay. Better to be heartbroken now than later. Better to know going into it what is and isn't possible so she doesn't chance leading Regina on and breaking her heart, too.

"No! I mean, no I'm not not okay," Henry fumbles. "I'm very okay, Mom."

"Wait, you are?"

He laughs at her surprise. "Duh! I've been telling you to get a girlfriend for ages. And Regina's awesome. She's probably the best you could have picked."

"So...so if I wanted to ask Regina to be my...girlfriend" - she's going to have to consider a new label because Regina doesn't really seem like the "girlfriend" type - "you'd be happy?"

"Congratulations, you are no longer concussed. Your brain is now able to process basic human speech."

"Alright, smartass," Emma growls, "it seems like all that time spent with Regina improved your vocabulary, not to mention your snarkiness. But, just checking one more time: this is something you're sure about, then? You're not going to change your mind and get all pissy about this in a week or a month or whenever you decide to be one of those angry kids that hates who their parents are dating and tries to destroy their relationships, right?"

"What? No. When have I ever been an angry kid?"

"Fair enough. I'm gonna tell her then, okay? I'm gonna say you'd be excited if we decide to go for it. Is that cool? I'm not putting words in your mouth or anything?"

"You have my permission," Henry giggles. "And I promise not to get 'pissy.'"

"Good."

"But that promise will be easier to keep if there's a puppy involved," he wheedles.

Emma lets out a short bark of laughter. "Don't push it, kid."

"I'm just saying puppies are awesome."

"Yeah, but once Regina and I are both back at work, there'd be no one home to take care of it. I mean, you're usually in New York and-" she stops abruptly when she realizes what she just said and immediately starts to backtrack. "I mean, not like Regina and I would be living together, even if we did start dating. And I don't even know if she's going to want to date me, so there really isn't any reason to be talking about it like this, and-"

"Mom, chill."

She takes a deep breath. "Yeah, alright, I'll chill. But, um...if she says yes, I'll send you a postcard?"

"I'll be waiting."

"Don't wait too hard."

There's a brief pause where he's saying something to Neal. "Dad says we're about to drive into a dead zone. Good luck, Mom. I love you!

Bye."

"I love you, too," she says quickly before he hangs up. "And thanks, Henry."

He probably didn't hear that last part.

Emma sets down the phone, looks back at her notepad, and sighs. Then she rests it on the steering wheel and chews at her pencil before writing "PROS" and "CONS" on the paper.

By the time she's finished, the pros list nearly takes up an entire page: *Beautiful; smart, challenging; good at cuddling; amazing with Henry; never boring no matter how much time we spend together; accepting; makes me laugh; secretly nurturing; helps make me better at life; makes me feel better about myself because she hates everyone except me...*

She could go on, if she wanted to.

The cons list contains only one item, but it's a pretty big one: *We work together.*

But maybe, in the grand scheme of things, it's not quite as big of a deal as she's making it out to be. In the worst case scenario, she could

transfer. Computer Crimes was boring as hell, but it wouldn't kill her. In fact, it would greatly minimize her chances of dying on the job, which would probably make Henry very happy. She couldn't ask Regina to transfer: that woman practically *is* the Homicide squad. Nothing would ever get done without her.

Emma leans back hard against the seat and finger-brushes some of the tangles out of her hair. She loves her job, she reminds herself, staring again at one particular item on her pros list, but she's always had one important rule: Henry comes first. And this...this *thing* she and Regina have...it's been good for her, but it's been even better for him.

How many of her past prospective relationships has she run away from the second they mentioned anything about meeting Henry? Women whom she's really liked, but hasn't committed to because she's afraid they'll be a negative influence on him? Or because they just don't understand that he'll always be one hundred percent more important than them? Or, in some cases, because she just knows they're not his type?

Too many to count.

But Regina...in the short time she and Henry have known each other, she's already become like a second mother to him. She understands him like no one else ever has, even Emma herself. What the two of them have is something special, and maybe it makes her a tiny bit jealous, but mostly it makes her overwhelmingly happy, because Henry deserves someone like Regina in his life.

That cop who saved her – Daniel – had said that being a good parent meant making sure her child got his best chance, and she's always tried to make that happen. She knows that despite loving her son more than all of the earth and heavens combined, she hasn't always been the best mother. She's tried, but she was only seventeen, and she'd never had a parent of her own as a role model. But maybe if she does this for him, if she gives him Regina, it will make up for all the mistakes she's ever made. Maybe this is fate; maybe it's serendipity. Maybe *Regina* is Henry's best chance.

Or maybe she's reading far too much into this situation. Henry likes Regina and she understands how important he is, and maybe that's enough.

Then she remembers the warmth of Regina in her arms and the softness of Regina's tearstained lips against her own and she crosses out the cons list, replacing it with *"Nothing we can't work out."*

xx

Cora's blonde and impossibly young secretary keeps shooting Regina strange glances as she paces back and forth, anxiously moving her hands in and out of her pockets and buttoning and unbuttoning her blazer. This one seems new. Apparently she hadn't yet been informed of her boss's emotionally-unstable daughter.

Not that she would have needed to be – Regina can't even remember the last time she was in her mother's Boston office. She doesn't know why she's here now, except that she has absolutely nowhere else to go.

She forces herself to stand still and look professional when two older men in suits walk out of the conference room. "Ms. Mills," the secretary calls, "you have a visitor. Your daughter is here to see you."

"My daughter?" Regina's heart sinks at the shock in her mother's voice. She shouldn't have come. She should just leave right now before-

"Regina!" Cora says brightly, her widened eyes looking surprised but incredibly pleased. "How nice to see you, dear. I was just about to take a late lunch. Would you like to join me?"

Regina doesn't – can't – reply, and Cora takes one look at her trembling hands and ushers her into the office before she can break down in front of the secretary. "Or I can order in," she suggests. "Anastasia, hold my calls, please."

"Now," she says once the door is shut, "what is all this about? Did something happen?"

Regina nods, and Cora guides her into a chair before sitting beside her and asking, "What is it, Regina?"

She opens her mouth to respond, but only a soft squeak comes out.

"Darling, whatever it is, I'm sure it's not the end of the world. Just breathe. You'll feel much better once you get it out."

Regina squeezes the arms of the chair and breathes; her body eventually calms, but her mind is still terrified and it feels like her head is being bashed repeatedly with a hammer. "Mama," she finally whispers, "when you said I should move on, and - and that the person's gender didn't matter...were you serious?"

"Well, it was meant to be a quip, but yes, I suppose the sentiment was serious enough. Why?"

Regina inhales, counts to ten, and blows out slowly. It's now or never. She squeezes her eyes shut and grits out, "I just...last night, I – Emma and I...I kissed Emma. My partner. I kissed her."

There's no reaction from her mother. Her heart pounding, she cracks one eye open, anticipating the worst, but Cora's facial expression hasn't changed. "Are...are you not surprised?" she stammers.

"No," Cora says nonchalantly. "Am I surprised that it took you so long? Yes. Am I surprised that I appear to be the first person you've told? Yes – surprised and flattered. But am I surprised that it happened? Not in the slightest. I've known that you've wanted to do that since the first time you brought her to Storybrooke."

"What? How could you have possibly known that? I didn't even know that!"

"You have a tendency to wear your heart on your sleeve, Regina. It was perfectly obvious; you just spent a long time choosing to be in denial. But now I suppose you're not anymore."

"It...it was just a kiss," Regina says softly, even though it was so much more. "That's all it was. It was in the heat of the moment, I was drunk, and I...tonight, we're going to talk about...about whether we want it to be more than that."

"I see," Cora says, pursing her lips and nodding. "And do you?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"You can lie to me as much as you want, dear, but you need to stop lying to yourself, or you'll never be happy. You obviously want more, or you wouldn't be here right now. Anyway," she continues, pulling a menu out of her desk drawer, "are you hungry? I've been craving a panini all morning. Perhaps we could split a sandwich and salad?"

"I...sure, that's fine," Regina dismisses. "Whatever you want to eat - I'm not even hungry." She massages her temple with the tip of her thumb and wills the headache to subside so she can think clearly. It doesn't listen.

"What about Emma?" Cora asks absentmindedly, more focused on her lunch order than her daughter. "I haven't known her for long, but it seems evident enough that she cares for you. Does she want something more, as well?"

"I don't know," Regina groans. "She...I don't know. Maybe she does. She has a lot to consider besides her feelings, though, Mother. She's only twenty-eight. She...her career is just starting out; this could ruin it. And then there's her son..."

She stops, unsure where this sudden honesty is coming from – maybe she really is still slightly drunk – and Cora smiles sympathetically. "I think Emma is smart and capable enough that she can make her own decisions regarding risks to her career, so you don't need to be the one to worry about that. As for her son, well, he's explicitly stated that he doesn't care who his parents date as long as they'll consider getting him a puppy. So just make your way to the nearest animal shelter, and you'll be all set as far as Henry goes. Actually, I was just reading an article the other day about support dogs for veterans with PTSD, so perhaps that's something you should consider no matter what you decide to do with Emma. It seems like it could help you."

"What...what is this?" Regina stammers, confused. Has she suddenly passed into a strange alternate universe where her mother is supportive and accepting? If Cora had been angry about it, then at least Regina could have been angry in return. But to this, she has no idea how to respond. "Is...are you giving me your blessing?"

"If that's what you want to call it, then I suppose I am," Cora says dismissively. "Now, would you prefer the Greek salad or Chicken Caesar? Personally, I'm in the mood for feta today, but I understand if you're not. And then I was thinking-"

"So it's just that easy?" Regina demands. She's starting to feel white-hot rage bubbling inside her despite her mother's uncharacteristic calm, and it explodes out before she can even think of controlling it. "Daniel and I were together for thirteen years, Mother. Thirteen years! And you never – not even *once* – expressed any sort of approval about it! Now I'm suddenly kissing this woman, my coworker of all people, who is *fifteen years younger than me*, and you just – this is fine with you?"

Cora shrugs. "I didn't give you my blessing to date Daniel because you never asked for it."

"Because you made it abundantly clear what your reaction would have been without my having to ask!" Regina cries.

"And did that stand in your way? No, it didn't, because you were a grown woman who didn't need your mother's approval to date anyone. You still are, in fact, but you're hurt and afraid and I think you've forgotten that. So, if you need my blessing to date Emma, then here it is. I want you to be happy, my love. I want you to have a life you can be proud of. That's all I've ever wanted, although I see now that I may not always have shown it in ways that were clear to you."

Regina looks down as her lower lip trembles and fights against the hot tears springing to her eyes. "I needed it then, too," she whispers. "Your blessing. I loved him so much, and...and it really hurt me that you didn't."

"It's true that I never fully approved of your relationship with Daniel, but at the time, you didn't let that stop you, and I have to say I admired that," Cora sighs. "You've always done things your own way, Regina. No point in changing that now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

There's a wistful look in Cora's eyes when she replies, "When you were five years old, you used to love *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. I remember thinking one day that I would surprise you with Snow White's dress for your Halloween costume, but when I brought it home from the seamstress's shop, you cried for hours because you wanted to be the Evil Queen instead." She smiles fondly and adds, "Looking back, I shouldn't have been so surprised. You used to paint apples and give them to your classmates, pretending they were poisoned. I got several concerned phone calls from your teacher, actually. No wonder you didn't have many friends."

"Is there a point to this highly embarrassing story?" Regina snaps.

Cora clasps her hand and says, "The point, my darling, is that I'm sure there will be a great many people who choose not to understand if you

decide to enter a relationship with Detective Swan. But I'm also fairly sure that no one has ever understood you."

Regina stares down at their joined hands and scowls.

"The world is a cruel place, Regina," her mother continues. "You know that better than anyone. There's always going to be something trying to take away your happiness, which is why I've tried to teach you to be a fighter."

"So, what? I need to fight for my happiness?" demands Regina. She shouldn't have come; her mother is making no sense and it's just making her more and more agitated by the second. "Who or what, exactly, am I fighting against?"

Cora looks her daughter up and down and smiles sadly. "Right now? Yourself."

"Mama-"

"There is nothing else standing in your way. Emma clearly returns your feelings. You can find a way to reconfigure your work situation – I'm know Robin would be happy to help. I don't have a problem with it; your father will be ecstatic; Emma's son worships the ground you walk on. The only obstacles are in here," she declares, cupping her hand against Regina's cheek. "They're all in your own mind."

Regina leans into it and softly admits, "I'm afraid, Mama."

"I know, darling, but you're also unbelievably brave."

The whimper that escapes from her throat suggests otherwise.

"I'm sorry, Regina. I'm sorry that you ever thought you needed my approval to live your own life, and I'm sorry that it hurt you not to have it. I shouldn't have tried to set you up with any of those men; I should have listened better when you told me what you needed. But in spite of all of that, you've always known, deep down, what you want. You know what's going to make you happy, and you *deserve* to be happy, Regina. Whatever doubt or fear or grief is holding you back, you're strong enough to fight it. You just need to believe."

Believe. There's that word again, coming from the last source she'd have ever expected it to. She had believed last night, and perhaps it was out of character and influenced by the alcohol, but then she'd woken up in the morning and Emma was still there. And Emma...Emma had said she'd liked it. Emma had said this was a good thing.

"I do," she whispers. "Mama, I believe."

"Then you know what you have to do. Go out there and fight for your happiness."

Regina nods. "I'm going to," she agrees, rising from the chair. "Thank you for your support. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome. Are you...do you not want to eat lunch?"

"I'm sorry, I just – I need to write down everything I want to say to her before I forget it," Regina apologizes. *And probably take about half a dozen aspirin before eating anything.*

"It's fine. Just make sure you eat *something* or you'll collapse before you can kiss her again. Emotional strength means nothing if your body is weak from hunger."

"I'll take that into consideration."

"You know," Cora says thoughtfully as Regina starts to walk out, "Looking back on your Evil Queen obsession, I'm fairly certain the paints we had around the house in those days were lead-based. So, those apples you were giving out actually were poisoned."

"I have no recollection of this," Regina insists.

"Good thing no one actually ate them, or you might have ended up with a criminal record. The discussions we'd be having about your career would be very different."

Regina smirks. "Goodbye, Mother."

xx

Emma drums restless fingertips on the tabletop at the restaurant where she'd agreed to meet Regina. She'd chosen Alberti's Pizzeria again, where they'd eaten with Henry, in the hopes that the familiarity would make everything less anxious for both of them and the greasy pizza would help with Regina's hangover, but now she's rethinking that. It's a bit too close to the station to be completely comfortable, and the fact that there's a history here almost adds pressure, rather than removing it.

She's starting to overheat in her nicest blazer – she'd considered wearing the leather jacket to show that she remembers (and respects) what they spoke about the night before, but it's too damn hot and she's not quite sure how Regina would react to the gesture.

She checks her watch. It's almost five past six: Regina is late.

Regina is never late.

Emma wonders, briefly, if she's been stood up, but she quickly abandons that thought. No matter what crap is going on inside of her head, Regina is reliable; not showing up at all is even less likely than being late. She probably just got caught up with something at the station: now that she's allowed to do more, the timing isn't quite as predictable.

She takes one last glance at her notepad before closing it with an apprehensive sigh and checking her watch again. Six past.

Suddenly, the door opens and Regina, dressed in sneakers and running shorts and breathing heavily, enters and flashes her a sheepish smile.

"Sorry I'm late," she mutters.

"Not a problem," Emma replies, looking her partner up and down in confusion. "Did you go running or something?"

"No, I was just having tea with the queen of England," Regina snaps, though not unpleasantly. "Yes, I was. It turns out that consuming almost a full liter of whiskey can make you quite a bit slower the next day."

"Learn something new every day," Emma jokes. She swallows hard and tries not to think about the light sheen of sweat on Regina's skin or the

fact that she has a full view of the brunette's toned biceps and calves. That's going to make all of this quite a bit harder. "So, how was work?"

"I didn't go."

"Wait, what? Why?"

"Locksley seemed to think it was in my best interest not to be present the day that Internal Affairs did a random evaluation of our squad," Regina says shortly. "He was probably correct."

"So...have you just been running all afternoon?"

"No, first I went to get my keys from ADA Blanchard, then I visited my mother, and *then* I went running."

"You want to tell me why ADA Blanchard had your car keys, or are we still just ignoring that particular elephant in the room?"

"We're ignoring it."

"Okay."

The two women sit together in silence, intermittently taking sips of water, until Regina suddenly asks, "Did you order anything?"

"Not yet," Emma replies. "I was waiting for you. I thought maybe...I don't know, maybe you'd want to reconsider the pizza?"

"Why, do you?"

"I don't know. It just seems like maybe this is a conversation we need to have in private."

Regina slowly nods. "You're probably right. I think...yes, you're right. But I've also just run thirteen miles, and I haven't eaten much all day, so is there a chance we can eat and then discuss this later?"

"Sure," Emma agrees, slightly cautious. She hopes this isn't a tactic to avoid the conversation entirely; she's employed plenty of those in her lifetime, and she's determined not to push the one person she could have chosen to love who has more baggage than she does, but this is a talk that absolutely needs to happen, sooner rather than later.

"So, how was your physical therapy?" Regina asks after they place an order for a spinach and tomato pizza. (*Regina and her insistence on eating vegetables*, Emma thinks irritably.)

"It was good," Emma replies. "He said I was doing better than he expected, and he gave me a couple of strengthening exercises to do. I'm seeing him again on Monday before work."

Before work.

Regina seems to have the same reaction to the words that Emma does, letting out the tiniest of gasps before quickly covering it up by taking a sip of water.

"I'm glad," she replies, her voice calm but her eyes darting nervously.

Emma takes a sip from her own glass and inquires curiously, "How was your mom? Why'd you visit her, anyway?"

"I visited her because I'm a devoted daughter-" Emma snorts "-and she's doing very well. Thank you for asking."

"She's kind of funny, in a strange way," Emma remarks, twirling her straw absently.

"Yes, I suppose she is. And occasionally very insightful, when she chooses to be."

"Oh yeah? Did she offer you some insight?"

Regina's hands unconsciously find the ring around her neck, pulling the chain out from under her shirt and running back and forth over what looks to be an inscription of some kind.

"She did," Regina murmurs.

There's more silence. It's horribly uncomfortable and Emma has to stop herself from breathing a sigh of relief when the pizza finally arrives.

"This is really good, in spite of the vegetables," she mumbles, her mouth already full, when suddenly Regina drops the slice she's about to bite into and looks as if she might cry.

"Emma, I – I have to say this before I completely lose my nerve. I – last night..."

Her voice trails off and her hands begin to tremble.

"Hey, it's okay," Emma says reassuringly, putting down her pizza and reaching across the table to intertwine Regina's fingers together with her own. "Whether it's good or bad, just say what you need to say."

Regina slowly blows air out of her nostrils and starts again. "Last night, when...when I kissed you, I was very drunk." Emma feels her heart sink down into the pit of her stomach, but Regina continues, "And I could very easily use that as an excuse, but...it's not. The alcohol may have given me the courage, but the motivation... Emma, I've wanted so badly to kiss you for months. I've dreamt of it, but for various reasons, I was too afraid to make that dream a reality. I-"

She pauses to wipe away the tears that have started streaming down her cheeks, tugging one hand away from Emma, but the other holds on tightly.

"For the last eleven years of my life, I've lived almost every moment in fear, and I just...I'm tired, Emma. I'm so tired of being afraid. I remember, sometimes, what it was like before, what it was like to actually feel alive. I want to have that again, and you – you and Henry – you've made me feel that way."

Emma's heart leaps practically into her throat, and she wonders if she's about to cry, too.

"I know that you might not feel as strongly as I do, and...and I understand that. I do. And if what I've just confessed to you is overwhelming, I'm sorry. I just...I just needed to finally tell the truth. To you. To myself."

Emma doesn't speak; she *can't* speak. This is, in fact, probably the most overwhelming thing anyone has ever confessed to her, but perhaps not

for the same reasons Regina suspects.

"I...I'm sorry Emma," Regina bursts out. "I'll just go." She abruptly stands and drops a twenty dollar bill on the table. "This should cover dinner. I just...I'm so sorry."

She practically knocks over a chair on her way out the door, leaving Emma staring bewilderedly after her, mouth hanging open and tears springing to her eyes.

An elderly man in the next booth over turns and says, "If you don't go after her, I will."

"Yeah..." Emma rasps. "Yeah, I'll...I'm on my way."

Emma grabs her wallet and notepad and sprints out of the restaurant, calling, "Regina, wait!" It turns out that she doesn't have to go very far: she finds her partner leaning against the side of the building, fighting back sobs with her arms wrapped protectively around her middle.

"You didn't even give me a chance to respond," Emma complains.

"I'm sorry, I...Emma, I'm so sorry," Regina repeats yet again. Her sobs have turned to hiccups, and before Emma knows it, she's pulling the other woman into her arms.

"Hey, you don't have to be sorry," she soothes, running her fingers through Regina's hair. "I totally get it. Getting scared and running away is usually what I do best in relationships. Before-"

Screw it. This isn't the time for her heartfelt confession; she'll save it for a time and place when Regina is calm enough for it to actually register.

"Would it make you feel alive to kiss in the middle of a crowded sidewalk?" she suddenly suggests.

Regina looks up, wide-eyed with confusion. "What?"

Emma leans in to close the gap between their lips, and Regina's gasp of surprise quickly turns into a soft moan of contentment as she unwraps her arms from around herself and lets them rest on Emma's hips, lightly tugging her in closer.

Emma lets her eyes flutter shut and draws a sharp breath in through her nose, a sensation of warmth filling her entire body when Regina melts into her, cautious but wholly passionate.

"Apparently it would," she observes when they break apart. Regina clears her throat and chuckles nervously.

"Yes, that was...enjoyable."

"Are you confident enough about my feelings that we can continue this conversation?"

Regina's eyes glance up and down the sidewalk, at the large number of people who – for the most part, anyway – aren't paying attention to them, and answers, "Maybe we could do it somewhere more private."

"Is my car okay?"

When they're safely inside – Regina insists on sitting in the driver's seat – Emma takes a deep breath and says, "Look, Regina, here's the thing: I'm horrible at relationships. Like, I've never had one that lasted longer than a couple of weeks. And even then, it's been...there hasn't been an emotional connection, you know? Every time there starts to be one, I run. So, like, my entire dating history is pretty much just a string of intermittent one-night-stands, usually poorly thought out ones."

"I see," Regina says quietly.

"And I thought I was happy with it," Emma continues. "I thought that's just the way I was, you know? I've always been a loner; I didn't need anyone. And then...I don't know. With you, it's different. I think that before, one of the reasons I always pushed people away was Henry. I didn't...well, I didn't want to share him, but also...I was terrified I'd bring home someone that he wouldn't be proud of me for dating. I don't

have any parents or close friends or anything like that, so, like, he's the only family I have, and I want – I *need* him to approve. I can't be serious about anyone if – if he doesn't, you know?"

"I understand. Does that mean-"

"I called him today and asked about it," Emma says with a smile, squeezing Regina's hand. "And, well, he loves you, but you probably already knew that. And the thing is...I've always been afraid that being with someone, devoting my energy to them instead of Henry, that it would make me a bad parent. And then you...I almost think you make me a better parent. I mean, Henry *did* say that having you around was like having two moms, right?"

"So, does that mean you want to be...serious?" Regina whispers, her expression deadly serious. "You...and me...you want that?"

"I told you, I'm shit at relationships. But with you...with you I want to try."

Regina nods. "I'd also like that. But the thing is, Emma, you say you're shit at relationships, but I've only had *one*."

"That's one more than me," Emma argues. "We're not counting weeklong sexual partners as relationships; that's not what I want from you, and I'm pretty sure that's not what you want from me, either."

"No, but I haven't even had those. Emma, I'm forty-three and I can count the number of sexual partners I've had on one hand. Is that not a turn-off for you?"

Emma shrugs. "Not really. I mean, we can take it slow if you want, if you're nervous."

"I'm not an easy person to deal with. I have - I guess you would say I have a lot of baggage. It's...it's even more than you know."

"Regina, it's not like we just met. I may not know about all of your baggage, but I'm not *totally* unaware of what I'm getting into."

"Why are you acting so nonchalant about this!" Regina demands. "You act like this is all going to be so easy, and it's not! Nothing about it is going to be easy!"

"I don't think it's going to be easy," Emma laughs. "It's going to be hard as hell and probably one or both of us is going to fuck something up at one point. But, I think maybe it's worth it."

"It's worth it," Regina repeats slowly, as if she's testing out the feel of the words on her tongue.

"I think...I don't know, I could be wrong, but this just feels right to me. It feels like...destiny."

"It does feel rather like destiny," Regina agrees with a sigh. "And I won't bother lying about the fact that I'm completely terrified by it, but I do I want to try. Like you said, this is worth it. *You're* worth it." She leans back against the seat and raises an eyebrow. "Why are you crying?"

"Sorry, I'm not," Emma mutters, forcefully swiping a hand across her cheek. "It's just that the last person who said anything like that to me was...well, you know."

The next thing she knows, Regina's hands are on her face and she's leaning across the armrest. "You are. You're worth *everything*." She brings their lips together again, with so much love and so much devotion in her eyes that Emma is almost uncomfortable.

"Am I worth a puppy?" she jokes. "Because, you know, Henry's really interested in that."

Regina laughs out loud and points out, "I think that's the exact opposite of taking it slow."

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much, as always, for all the comments, kudos, etc. I'm very sorry I haven't replied to them yet. This will be the end of my super-fast updating spree, because I go back to work tomorrow (sad times) and I don't have anything from the next few chapters pre-written. It'll most likely go back to updating every 7-10 days from here on out. (I'm thinking there will be ~25 chapters total, more or less depending on how many words it takes for everything to happen, to give you a basic idea of what's left.)
>
> **Trigger Warning for PTSD and self-harm in the last section. Flashbacks are in the italicized portion, and everything following it is probably fairly sensitive as well. (If you want, you can message me and I'll send a heavily sanitized summary.)

Emma's head is nestled in her lap as her fingers gently tug the knots out of tangled blonde curls, and Regina feels a single tear trickle down her cheek at the simple perfection of the moment.

It's been eleven years. Eleven years of fear and heartache and never truly knowing if she would be able to carry on until the next day, much less feel anything akin to happiness again.

She knows, beyond any doubt, that this won't last. It can't. And as charitable as Emma had been to say that either of them could "fuck something up," Regina knows it's probably going to be her. Her experience may be limited, but it's always been her.

Emma wriggles around so she's looking up into Regina's eyes, and she says, "You know, there is one thing we haven't talked about that we probably have to."

"Our massive age difference? Our work situation?" Regina guesses, heart sinking.

"I wouldn't say our age gap is *so* massive," Emma argues, trying to joke. "It's not like I'm dating Hillary Clinton or someone like that. I don't know. I mean, I know you're older than me, but it's not something I actively think about most of the time. Do you? Do you think I'm a dumb kid or something?"

"What? Emma, no!" Regina exclaims. She chuckles darkly and adds, "Most of the time, I actually think you have your life together better than I do. It's just...I worry you might...well, you'll soon find that I worry about everything, if you hadn't noticed already. Maybe it's unnecessary, but I don't think I can help it."

Emma pushes herself off Regina's lap and sits up so she can plant a reassuring kiss on her cheek. "In this case, it is. Totally unnecessary. But I was actually referring to our work situation. I think in that case, worrying might not be so uncalled for."

Regina sighs and sinks into the couch cushions.

"You're right."

"So," Emma says tentatively, "this is where I might bring up our age difference, because you've been on the force a lot longer than I have. What do you think? Can two cops date?"

"Of course," Regina answers immediately. She'd dated Daniel for thirteen years; Robin and Marian were together for almost seventeen, and a few other examples spring to mind. Of course, none of them had been partners, or even on the same squad, and perhaps even more glaringly, none had been same-sex couples.

That's another complication she hadn't considered.

"I do think, though, that we're going to have to be discreet, and...cautious about how we approach it. And if – if we want this to be something serious and...and-"

"Long-term?" Emma suggests.

"Right. Long-term."

She's not sure why that's so hard for her to say.

"If we want it to be long-term, we have to...what?"

"We should probably consider a situation where we're not working directly together," Regina replies sadly. "Different squads. We might be forced into it anyway, if we're not careful."

"I can transfer back to Computer Crimes," Emma immediately replies.

"Emma, no!" Regina cries. "You hated working there. I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking; I'm making a choice," argues Emma, "and it's not the first time I've considered it. Better hours, better safety – I have to think about Henry, too. Besides, the alternative is you transferring. You can't throw your career away over me."

"My career is effectively finished, anyway," Regina mutters, "or it could be at any moment. You become enough of a liability and being asked to take early retirement is much more likely. I'm less than a year away from finishing my twenty on the force, and I'll be eligible to start collecting my pension. It's going to happen sooner or later."

"But this job is your life," Emma protests. "You've said that multiple times. Did you suddenly change your mind?"

Regina shakes her head, eyes closed, and admits, "I'm not sure. For a long time, the job was the only part of my life that gave me any sense of purpose, and now I just...I know that *this*, what we have right now, is important to me. And I know that *you* are important to me, and if there's going to be any backlash from this, I want to protect you from it, as much as I can."

Emma nuzzles her forehead against Regina's neck and flashes her a watery smile. "You're important to me, too. Second most important in my life, remember? If there's any backlash, we'll face it together."

"Emma, you have so much potential," Regina says softly, resting her head on top of Emma's and wrapping her arm around the younger woman's shoulders. "You're just starting out. I would hate to think that – I don't know, that dating me somehow destroyed your career trajectory."

"Well, stop worrying about me," Emma orders. "I know I've been really adamant in the past about not getting involved with coworkers, but you...Regina, unlike you, I have a bunch of things that are more important to me than my career, and like it or not, you're one of them."

"Emma, I..."

"And I *wish* there was a way that we could have it all, but if we can't, then I'm willing to make that sacrifice."

"And whether *you* like it or not, I am too. Even if you're driving me insane right now with your ridiculous arguments."

"What would be the fun of it if we didn't argue?" Emma asks with a wry smile. "Anyway, let's not start preparing for doomsday just yet. There might be a way we can work around anyone having to give up their career. I'm willing to experiment with optimism."

"I could talk to Robin about it," Regina suggests halfheartedly.

Emma wrinkles her nose. "Isn't directly outing ourselves to our commanding officer, like, the opposite of discreet? I mean, I know you guys are close, but..."

"He's...he's my best friend," sighs Regina. "And this isn't about discretion – this is about covering our asses. I think the consequences of *not* telling him would be worse, at least for me." The idea of being in a relationship and not telling Robin about it hurts on a personal level; he's supported her for far too long. He deserves to know.

"Well, if that's something you need to do, then go right ahead."

Emma is trying hard to sound cavalier, but her eyes are fearful, and Regina feels her own fill with tears at the idea of the beautiful young woman in her arms ever having to put up with the abuse that she'd had to fight through at the beginning of her career.

"Emma," she says softly, stroking her hair, "I promise I won't let anything happen to you. Whatever backlash we end up facing, I'll protect you from it."

"Here's the thing, though," Emma says, straightening and turning to face Regina, "I'm not really worried – much, anyway – about my job. What I *am* a little concerned about is you offering yourself up as a sacrifice. I don't need you to protect me."

"*I* need me to protect you," Regina insists, and Emma just shrugs and returns to whatever superhero movie she's watching on the TV – she's too anxious to pay much attention.

That night, as Regina brushes her teeth, she looks in the mirror and considers who she is.

Regina Mills, homicide detective.

For the longest time, after she'd given up the possibility of the titles "wife" and "mother," it had been all she would ever allow herself to be. She'd been a cop – a good one, at that – and that had been enough. It had to be enough, because there wasn't anything else left for her.

But now, all of a sudden, she's someone different.

Regina Mills, in love with Emma Swan.

And she knows what she has to do.

xx

Regina arrives at the station at six forty-five and sees – as she suspected – the light is already on in Locksley's office. On the nights that Roland stays with his grandparents, he's fairly likely to crash on the small couch in his office. She knocks softly on the door, hesitant to wake him if he's actually sleeping for once.

He's not, unsurprisingly.

"Regina, come in," he rumbles, yawning sleepily as he glances at his watch in surprise. "You're a bit early today."

She rubs clammy palms on her pants and ignores his constant need to state the obvious. "Are you busy?" she demands.

"Do you need me?"

"Would I be in your office at quarter-to-seven in the morning if I didn't?"

"Fair enough. What's going on?"

"I...I don't even know where to begin," Regina sighs, nervously reaching for her ring under her shirt.

"Is this about Wednesday night?" Her silence answers the question for him, and he looks down sheepishly. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you yesterday, it was-"

"Robin, no. I'm not...I'm not upset with you, if that's what you're thinking. I actually...I dealt with it. I was a mess yesterday, but today, I'm not."

"Oh?" He looks surprised. Impressed, even.

"Yes, but I do still need to talk to you about what happened, I think."

"You seem a bit nervous about it."

"I...yes, I am."

"Let me see if I can guess. You were really upset on Wednesday, probably having nightmares. You got drunk off your ass, called Swan, she came over, and *something* happened between you two, probably something that involved you acting on your long-repressed feelings for her. Did you kiss her? Something more?"

"How did you know all of that?" she demands, scowling.

"I know she was at your apartment because she called me at three in the morning, asking for your address. The rest...the rest is conjecture based on twenty years of knowing you."

"I hate you."

"And yet, you're here," he observes with a grin. "And I find myself willing to put up with your abuse because just yesterday, you said you loved me. So, how can I help? Do you need advice? More whiskey? Funding for your one-way plane ticket to Guam?"

"I need..." Regina sighs. "Robin, the problem isn't just that I kissed her when I was drunk."

"No?"

"No, the problem – the problem is that I'm in love with her!" she bursts out. "You already knew that, but it seems...it seems I'm not the only one who feels that way."

Robin raises his eyebrows. "Really? I mean, I knew she cared about you, but I thought it was sort of like you and me, you know? Friendship. And I thought she slept with Jones that one time."

"She didn't," Regina replies, shaking her head vehemently. "She was never interested in Jones. She...she slept with his sister."

Then she immediately claps her hand over her mouth because that was absolutely *not* her place to reveal. *I'm sorry, Emma,* she thinks desperately.

Locksley looks fairly nonplussed. "Hmm...so she bats for the other team. Interesting. I had thought...well, anyway, I suppose I was wrong. Good for you guys."

Regina blinks. "Pardon?"

"I think what I said was fairly clear."

"It was, but...Robin, the woman showed up for work in a leather jacket on the first day and *she's* the one you're surprised 'bats for the other team?'"

"Well, I always knew *you* did," he chuckles. "Don't think I didn't see the pictures from Marian's bachelorette party."

Regina grimaces as her face burns beet red. "That was all Marian," she mutters.

"It's was ninety percent Marian," he concedes with a smirk. "She always had that strange thing for pregnant women that was borderline inappropriate. But it was ten percent you."

"And, of course, you think all of this is hilarious. How mature of you."

Robin quickly sobers his features. "I don't think *all* of it is hilarious. I won't lie: the idea of you and Marian hooking up during your weekend on the Cape has always been amusing to me. Your current situation with Swan seems slightly less so."

"This could ruin me," Regina admits, a slight tremor in her voice. "And to be perfectly honest, I'm past the point of caring if it does. But I can't – I won't – allow it to ruin Emma. That's why I'm here, Robin. That's the only reason I'm here: to protect her. Transfer me if you have to, wherever there's an opening; I'll work in Evidence Management until retirement. Just...just promise me that if it comes down to that, you'll be there for her. Promise you'll help her succeed the way that I couldn't."

Robin just stares, open-mouthed, until Regina wonders if perhaps he had fallen asleep with his eyes open while she was talking. Rolling her eyes, she grabs the clipboard from his desk and thunks it against his head. "Ow!" he exclaims. "I was just – *shit*, Regina!"

"Your eloquence is inspiring."

"Sorry, it's just that you seem *really* serious about this. About her."

"I am."

"It seems like maybe...you want this to go somewhere."

"I do."

"And she...?"

"We both want to try." She exhales long and hard, forcing all the air from her lungs, and tries to massage the tension out of her head with her thumb. It's all out in the open now; there's no taking it back.

And as terrifying as that is, the way it's making her heart pound is more of a thrill than anything else.

Robin nods. "Okay," he says agreeably. "Well, thanks for the heads up. You hungry? Beanheads opens in a few minutes, and I'm craving one of their bacon omelets."

Regina's eyes narrow. First her mother and now Robin – why has everyone she's told about this suddenly started talking about food?

"So, what happens next?" she asks.

He just shrugs. "We'll play it by ear. I mean, yeah, it's a little...unorthodox, but there's no explicit policy against two members of the same squad dating each other. I don't think we need to worry about transferring you to Evidence just yet. I might not want to send you to crime scenes together for a while, obviously, but...well, to be perfectly honest, after everything that happened, I was thinking of doing that anyway. We'll just keep it quiet at work and see what happens, for now. I'm really not in the mood to replace you: I'd probably have to train the rookie myself, given the average level of competence around here."

"Okay," Regina says slowly. This all sounds much less catastrophic now that Robin's said it out loud.

"So, I think what happens next is I eat an omelet, and you can decide whether or not you want to join me, but hopefully you will, and then we can pretend to be high-schoolers and gossip about the pretty girls we like."

"Wait, what? You like a pretty girl, too?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he teases with a playful waggle of his eyebrows. "Come on; I'll buy you an apple muffin."

Regina throws her head back and laughs as Robin hooks elbows with her and tugs her out the door. She hasn't felt so lighthearted, so free – like she could start floating through the air at any moment – since the first time she kissed Daniel.

Speaking of Daniel...

No, she decides that's too personal, and it's not her story to tell.

She'll keep it to herself, in the quiet of her heart, and let it continue to grow and blossom as it overwhelms her with love and gratitude.

Daniel had given her so much: happiness, hope, confidence, unconditional love.

And without even realizing it, he had given her a second chance.

xx

"Possible homicide at the park," Locksley calls from his office.

"Possible?" asks Humbert.

"Uniforms found an abandoned baby, surrounded by a pool of blood. The baby was uninjured, so it stands to reason the blood must have come from somewhere," the lieutenant explains in a rush. "At the very least, we have a very seriously injured missing guardian. Nolan, Mills, I want you at the scene."

Nolan eyes Regina warily and asks, "Where's Jones?"

"Called in sick – probably with that stomach bug that's going around."

"Oh, right, the one that Mills had yesterday," Nolan mutters. "You're not still contagious, are you?"

Regina narrows her eyes in confusion before remembering the story that Locksley had told the squad to explain her absence the previous day. "Yes, I'm fine," she says quickly. "It was a quick, twenty-four hour one. I'm sure the brainless wonder will be back in fine form by Monday."

Nolan rolls his eyes and grabs his keys, saying, "I'll pull my car around front," and Locksley beckons Regina into his office.

"You up for this?" he asks. "I could send Booth, but-"

"I can do it," Regina confirms, trying to show much more confidence than she feels. "I'm ready."

He nods, and she grabs her badge and gun and jogs out the door to where Nolan's waiting in the car. She slips awkwardly into the passenger seat (That's one reason she could never be partnered with Nolan, she thinks: they're both too controlling about who takes the wheel.) and waits for her longtime colleague to say something.

He doesn't.

"Are you going to drive?" she asks impatiently. "The nature of the crime seemed a bit urgent."

"Yeah," Nolan mutters, eyes downcast.

She catches him staring at her at a stop light and sighs, thinking that of all of idiot brigade, Nolan's trust should be the easiest to earn back. They've disliked each other, sure, but he'd known her for years prior to her breakdown.

"If you have something to say, David, then just say it," she snaps.

"Oh, sorry," he says quickly. "You just...you look strangely happy today."

"Really?" Regina checks her appearance in the side mirror, and thinks that maybe there *is* something about her face that's changed. Nothing specific, but she agrees that she looks different. It could be happiness. She's happier than she's been in a long time. "Perhaps I do," she agrees, before giving Nolan a once-over. He looks terrible – dark circles under his eyes, pale skin, hair unkempt. How had she not noticed before. "And *you* look strangely depressed."

"Personal life crap," he mumbles.

Right, Regina remembers, *Mary Margaret*.

"I just...did you ever meet someone, and you thought you had something with them, and then it turned out your feelings were one-sided all along?"

"Can't say that I have," Regina replies uncomfortably, hands fidgeting.

"She said she never loved me, and never will, and that there was no place for us together," he says glumly. "She said it was too cruel a fate to continue to let me believe we had a chance, and that I should fill my heart with love for someone else. And I...I just never realized. I thought she returned my feelings. I thought she loved me."

He's crying, Regina realizes in shock. Mary Margaret had done an incredibly thorough job of breaking his heart.

"And I just keep wondering if maybe, somehow, there's hope for us. Maybe she'll change her mind, but...I don't know, it all seems pretty hopeless," he sighs. "Would you ever do it?"

"Do what?"

"Act like you loved someone, and then just...deny everything?"

"I would," she replies carefully, "if I was afraid."

"But I don't think I've given her any reason to be afraid!"

"Maybe it's not about you," Regina snaps. "Why do men think everything women do and feel is about them? I don't know anything about your situation, but people have a lot of reasons to be afraid of love. Maybe she's been hurt before; maybe she's lost someone; maybe her father is a psychopath that murdered ten people and she's afraid you'll hold that against her; you never know!"

"That last one seems a bit unlikely."

"Or maybe she just doesn't love you. The heart wants what it wants," she mutters. "We're here, by the way."

A crowd of officers and crime scene analysts is already scouring the park, and Officer Fa jogs over to meet them, looking urgent. Regina chuckles to herself, remembering Locksley's confession at the coffee shop that morning.

"What have we got, Mulan?" Nolan asks tiredly.

"Large pool of blood on the ground, signs of a struggle, an abandoned baby, and...nothing. Dr. Whale is trying to gather blood samples for DNA testing."

"Dr. Whale is here? But there's no body."

"There's a body," the Medical Examiner calls. "With this amount of blood, there's definitely someone dead. It's just a matter of finding them."

"Where does the blood trail lead?" Regina inquires.

"That's the problem: there isn't one," Officer Fa explains, her eyes worried. "Not even bloody footprints. We've got crime scene techs making casts of all the shoe prints and all the tire tracks from the road, but there are dozens."

"The murderer could have...yeah, I've got nothing," Nolan says tiredly. "That doesn't make sense."

"Someone experienced," Regina suggests, "with lots of practice leaving no trace." Suddenly, an angry wail in the distance reminds her of the other peculiarity of this crime scene. "The baby?" she asks urgently.

"That's her; she's over there. Not a scratch on her," Mulan explains. "It's a girl, and Dr. Whale says she's about eight months. She can't...talk, obviously. No ID or even, like, monogramming on anything, so no help with her name. We're sending her photo to all the local news stations right now. Hopefully, someone can identify her."

"Then maybe we can figure out who she was with, get closer to identifying our victim, anyway," sighs Nolan.

Regina feels some strange force deep within her chest tugging her toward the cries, and Fa and Nolan follow.

"What I can't figure out, though, is why the murderer would leave the baby behind," Fa says thoughtfully. "It's messy. If we're thinking this person's experienced enough not to leave behind much forensic evidence, then why would they leave behind a potential witness?"

"Well, if the child can't talk, she's not much of a witness," Regina points out, "although I agree, it's messy. It doesn't align with everything else."

She approaches the officer holding the baby, a short, burly man named Leroy who's looking increasingly distressed as she continues to cry.

"Why is she still here?" Regina asks.

"Social services is *supposed* to show up to take her to temporary foster care," he says with a scowl, "but they're delayed. She keeps crying and won't eat."

"Here, let me try," Regina offers, taking the baby into her arms. "Hello, little one," she coos, rocking her back and forth. "You must be pretty scared, but you're safe now, alright? Some nice people are going to come take care of you soon."

The baby slowly quiets, drawn to the sound of her voice. "She was terrified," Regina scolds. "You can't just growl at babies, especially ones who were probably traumatized earlier this morning. Here, let me feed her."

She touches the bottle to the child's lips, and she drinks hungrily. "You're safe; I've got you," Regina repeats.

"How do you know so much about babies?" Nolan asks curiously.

"I have common sense," Regina retorts, "and I've spent a lot of time watching Locksley's son."

"Right, well, if you're going to be on childcare duty, I'll continue processing this scene."

Nolan and Fa return to the crime scene, and Regina continues to rock the baby (who starts smiling and playing with her hair once she's finished eating) until the social worker finally shows up. Regina's heart sinks as the child is taken out of her arms, but her attention is quickly diverted back to matters of the case.

The rest of the day is spent tracking the few leads they've managed to uncover, most of which don't lead anywhere, and helping man the anonymous tip line. Calls are pouring in, but they're mostly distraught people who clearly don't understand that the purpose of a tip line is for callers to give tips, rather than receive them. Reinforcements have been called in, but the phones just keep ringing.

She's just hung up on perhaps the most irritating person she's ever spoken to when Locksley comes in and stares, startled, at her.

"Mills, what are you still doing here?"

"Working the case," she snaps. "My job."

"We agreed six hours a day. You've been here for nine!"

"Then you shouldn't have given me the assignment. I'm trying to find our victim, a killer, and the baby's family. I'm not going home."

"We agreed," he hisses. "Your mental health comes first."

"My mental health will be better if this case is solved sooner," she whispers angrily. "Nolan can't do it by himself."

"Booth, you're staying tonight. Help Nolan!" Locksley calls. "There, that covers that. Now, go home. You can come back tomorrow for a few hours if you still want to help, but we've got this. We don't even have a body yet. The baby is safe for the night, Whale won't get the DNA results for her or for the blood at the scene until tomorrow at the earliest – go home!"

Hot tears spring to her eyes, and she stares up at him, utterly betrayed. "Robin, I – I need-"

"Regina, you've already done more today than you're technically supposed to. You need to go home, get some rest, and maybe enjoy your dinner date – or have you forgotten about that?"

She had forgotten, she thinks guiltily as she trudges out to her car. How could she have forgotten about Emma in place of the job when just this morning, she was ready to give up the job entirely for Emma?

But how could she have even considered giving up the job when it's so damned important?

Sitting in her car, Regina sighs and leans her head against the steering wheel. She *did* do a lot today, she reminds herself. And she'll be back tomorrow to do more. She's not broken. She just has to take things slowly.

And Emma is waiting for her at home and she's they're supposed to make dinner together.

She wonders if it's okay that deep down in her heart, she doesn't really feel guilty for leaving.

She wonders if she'll ever understand herself.

xx

Her shoulder may be getting stronger, but it's still not quite strong enough to support the weight of a full bag of groceries, Emma realizes with a groan as she's leaving the farmer's market. It's a lopsided walk home as she's forced to carry both heavy bags in her right hand, leaving her terribly unbalanced.

She's never even heard of half these vegetables Regina's making her buy. Kale? Heirloom tomatoes? What the hell is an *heirloom* tomato? Is

that just code for ugly? And how do they know all of these wild mushrooms aren't poison?

She's going to have to make another trip to pick up the wine, she thinks, scowling. Not to mention the meat, which Regina's insisting she buy from some specialty butcher's shop halfway across town. It had been easy to forget, when they were chasing down criminals together, that Regina had been raised as part of the one-percent. Off the job, though, the senior detective clearly has a taste for the finer things in life, or at least as fine as her salary allows for.

Not that she's complaining – not really. She'd be perfectly fine if they spent their first "date night" (Is it really a date if you stay home and cook? She's still not sure, but Regina insists it is, and Regina definitely has more experience planning romantic evenings, so she'll defer to the older woman's judgment.) eating Pop-tarts and playing Henry's video games, but it's important to Regina that everything is fancy.

So they'll be eating homemade filet mignon with braised kale and mushrooms and an heirloom tomato salad and some expensive red wine that Emma's probably pronouncing completely wrong.

She wonders if Regina is aware of the fact that she basically only knows how to make frittatas and soups and dishes that just involve mixing things over low to medium heat until they're cooked, and she's never made filet mignon or kale or any of these things, and that allowing her to do so might lead them both to come down with food poisoning.

Well, she thinks she can maybe sauté the mushrooms. That sounds simple enough. Maybe she can pour the wine, too. Regina can do everything else.

She finally stumbles into her house, leaves the vegetables in the refrigerator, and takes her car to the butcher and the liquor store.

Her face breaks into a smile when she pulls up in front of her building and sees Regina's car already there.

She runs up the stairs two at a time, exhaustion from her long walk forgotten, and bursts into the apartment to find Regina grumbling as she unpacks a giant bag onto the kitchen counter, her apron already on.

"Did you bring your entire kitchen?" she asks, slightly amused, as Regina's head emerges behind a giant cast iron skillet.

"During the time I lived with you, I became aware that you lacked most of the supplies necessary to cook a halfway decent steak," Regina replies with an accusatory glare, "including a meat thermometer and a skillet made from a material appropriate for searing."

"Well, excuse me if I usually don't cook anything that can't be made in a slow cooker," Emma snaps playfully. "Filet mignon wasn't exactly taught in the life-skills class at my teen shelter."

Regina stares at her hands, cheeks flushing, and Emma briefly feels badly about it.

"By the way, good evening," she says, placing the bags on the counter. "How was your day at work?"

"It was interesting," Regina says, embarrassment forgotten as a worried look crosses her face. "I...I did tell Locksley about our...situation, but it was fine. No one's losing their job, at least not right now, anyway. We got a case – a pretty intense one, actually. Baby found at the park, mother or other caregiver is either dead or near-dead and missing. I'm probably going to have to go in tomorrow, too."

"Wait, hold up!" Emma exclaims. "You're on the case?"

"Nolan and I are on it, yes."

"High five!"

She holds her hand up and Regina stares at it quizzically.

"I mean, that's tragic, but awesome that Locksley thinks you're doing well enough to take care of it, right? So, high five!"

Regina is still staring at her hand like she's not sure what she's supposed to do to it, and Emma remembers belatedly that they're now in a "relationship," so she kisses her instead.

"Seriously, congratulations," says Emma.

"It's not a big deal," Regina murmurs, glancing down at fidgeting hands. "Especially since he still made me leave the station early for 'mental health' reasons."

"I'm proud of you," Emma whispers secretively into her ear even though there's no one else to hear it. "Hero."

"That will be plenty of *that*." Regina clears her throat and looks expectantly at the grocery bags. "You'll hear more than enough about the case when you get back to work on Monday. The baby is safe and we're working on figuring out who all the blood belongs to. Shall we start cooking?"

"Yeah, sure," Emma agrees. "Veggies are in the fridge. I'll just wash my hands and we can get started. What comes first?"

"You can start washing and cutting the vegetables, and I'll prepare a rub for the meat. Did you manage to find the correct wine?"

"Yeah, I got your Rioja or whatever that is."

"It's a region of Spain where they a grow a specific kind of grape," Regina explains, quickly retrieving salt, pepper, and olive oil (Emma has no idea when she acquired such a fancy looking bottle of extra virgin olive oil – Regina must have bought it the last time she was here.) from Emma's cabinet. "Or at least where they originated. Similarly, champagne got its name because the grapes used to make it were originally grown in the Champagne region of France." Regina pulls the bottle out of its paper bag and studies it with approval. "I've heard this is a great vintage," she says authoritatively, and Emma feels her stomach flip flop.

"Your sommelier talk is really sexy, you know that, right?"

"Stem the kale, Detective Swan."

"Okay, no flirting in the kitchen," Emma mutters, scrubbing the kale and mushrooms in the sink until all of the visible dirt is gone. The mushrooms take a lot of effort – she wonders how humans ever got the idea to eat random fungi they found on the ground.

"I should have brought my mushroom scrubbing brush," Regina sighs.

"You have a special brush, specifically for scrubbing mushrooms?" Emma chuckles. "I'm learning so many strange new things about you, Regina Mills."

"It's not *that* strange. Mushrooms can be difficult to clean. But you're doing an excellent job."

Emma snorts and scrubs harder.

"Isn't that...I don't know, a lot?" she demands as Regina empties the entire bowl of mushrooms that she's just washed into the pan. "Like, are we going to eat all that? Shouldn't we save some of it for later?"

"The cells are comprised mainly of water, which steams off as we cook them," Regina tells her. "It'll take up a lot less space once it's done, trust me. You knew that, didn't you?"

"I've never cooked fresh vegetables before," Emma admits. "I mean, not really. I usually just bought the frozen ones and turned them into a soup or something."

"No wonder your son thinks he hates vegetables." Regina rolls her eyes dramatically, but it seems more fond than anything. "No wonder *you* hate them."

"How, exactly, am I supposed to stem the kale? Do I just...rip off the stem?"

"Exactly, pull the spine all the way out. We'll cook those separately – they're thicker, so they require a slightly different amount of time."

Emma nods as if she understands (She thinks she does, anyway.) and watches Regina prepare the steaks for cooking.

"That looks...almost simple," she observes.

"It is. Making steak is not an excessively complicated process, but it takes practice to perfect the technique. Watch and learn."

Emma watches. And learns. And gets scolded when she gets a spatula to plate the steaks as soon as Regina removes the pan from the heat – apparently they need to sit for ten minutes to allow the juices to settle.

"But it smells so good," she complains. "My mouth is literally watering right now."

Regina scowls. "I don't understand why Henry continuously talks about getting a puppy when he has *you* already." She gives Emma a quick kiss and then observes, "I think the kale is ready."

Emma looks on in fascination as her partner moves effortlessly between showing affection and...well, cooking. It's strange how quickly Regina seems to have fallen into such routine domesticity already, whereas

Emma feels totally out of her element. She's made dinner before; she's kissed before; why does it feel so foreign to do both at the same time?

Regina seems to have all of these relationship-y things figured out already, despite being out of practice for eleven years, but Emma...she just has no idea, and it's terrifying. She's not sure whether to admit it, or just pretend she knows what she's doing until Regina inevitably finds out that she doesn't.

Maybe she should just put it out there and be done with it. Regina's been deprived of love for such a long time – she deserves someone who knows how to be domestic with her and understands romantic gestures like sending flowers and that kind of thing, not someone who thinks Pop-tarts and Mario Kart could possibly constitute a romantic evening. How could she have been so stupid.

"Emma, would you mind washing these tongs quickly?" Regina asks, interrupting her increasingly panicked train of thought. "We're ready to begin plating."

Washing dishes, she's good at. Emma quickly runs a sponge over the tongs and then pours two glasses of wine as Regina expertly arranges the meat and vegetables into perfectly spaced portions like she's a chef at a five-star restaurant.

"Hey, maybe if you ever decide to retire, you can take up cooking full-time," she jokes.

Regina looks like she's seriously considering it. "I don't have the talent or experience, but that sounds like something I might enjoy," she muses.

They sit down at the kitchen table, which Regina has set with more silverware than Emma has ever seen before in her life, and stare at each other expectantly. Regina raises her glass, and Emma mimics her, awkwardly wondering what she's supposed to say.

"Cheers?" she offers.

"Yes, to...to new beginnings," Regina toasts, her voice cracking slightly as she averts her eyes from Emma for a moment.

Emma nods in agreement and takes a tentative sip of wine (Regina swirls hers around in her glass, first). She's not a huge wine drinker, but it's better than she expected. Still, she sets her glass down excitedly and digs into the filet mignon.

"Oh wow," she practically moans, "this is amazing."

"I'm glad you think so, dear," Regina says with a pleased smile. "Be sure to eat your vegetables, too. The kale, especially, is good for you."

The rest of the meal passes in comfortable silence. Emma finds she enjoys everything (except, perhaps, the tomato salad – she can't seem to

taste a difference between heirloom tomatoes and regular ones, except for their disgusting appearance), and she's raising her wine glass to wash down her last bite when she happens to gaze up at the way Regina's fork is lingering between her lips.

There's no reason eating should be so sexy, but somehow it is, she thinks, feeling the flutters again in the pit of her stomach, warming her insides until they're suddenly interrupted by a cold wet splash on her leg.

"Shit!" she gasps, jumping up from the table to see that half of her wine has apparently dribbled onto her pant leg. "Crap! Damn it! I'm sorry Regina; I think I just ruined this romantic evening."

"It's just a bit of wine, dear; don't worry about it," Regina says calmly. "Just take your pants off and change into new ones."

Still cursing and mentally berating herself for being utterly un-dateable, Emma rushes into her room and peels off her wet jeans, sighing in dismay.

"These jeans were my favorite, too," she complains, holding them up and staring sadly at the reddish-purple stain that travels halfway down the pant leg.

"I'm sure it will wash, dear," Regina says absentmindedly from the doorway. "Just let it soak for a while. Detergent was invented for a

reason, you know."

Emma looks up to make a sarcastic remark, but she's distracted by the way her partner's eyes are traveling up the length of her legs. Her gaze is hungry, almost predatory, and Emma feels a shiver travel down her spine at the unexpectedness of it, because so far she's seen Regina emotionally passionate but never physically so. She'd figured, what with the other woman's history, it might be a while before she had it in her.

But from the way Regina's looking at her now, it's plain to see she had it figured wrong.

"You like what you see?" she teases, setting her jeans down beside the bed.

In another wholly unexpected move, the other woman practically tackles her onto the bed, and Emma wonders if she'll ever stop being surprised by the many contradictory sides of Regina Mills.

Then again, she thinks as Regina's hands make their way up her thighs and onto her ass, tugging down her panties with almost desperate speed, maybe the surprise is part of the appeal.

xx

Regina's fingers find their way inside of Emma, twisting and thrusting, hard and then soft, and she watches the younger woman intently, drinking in every inch of her body with awe as she writhes and moans.

"Have – have you done this before?' Emma gasps. "This...wow."

Regina isn't quite sure how to respond, because yes, she's done this before, but she hasn't done *this* before.

With Marian, it had been different. Pleasuring Marian had been an adventure, something fun and playful, punctuated by giggles and exclamations of surprise, made so alluring in part by its slight aura of danger (and in part by the confusing mixture of hormones in her bloodstream), but supported by the safety net of their friendship.

Here, now, there is no safety net. This is something wholly different, something that feels like floating in midair before the inevitable plummet. Regina doesn't speak – she doesn't breathe – only watches and listens to the reactions as her fingers move of their own accord, working as if by instinct to bring Emma closer and closer to release.

Now, she doesn't feel like giggling. In fact, when she hears Emma's whimper of "Regina...fuck," her breath catches in her throat and she feels like she might cry, itching for some kind of release of her own as her heart pounds harder and faster with every pulse of Emma's hips and

every sigh that escapes her throat. The thigh Regina is straddling rubs involuntarily between her legs as Emma's body jerks, and Regina feels a hunger, a longing grow down below the pit of her stomach that she hasn't allowed herself to feel in ages.

She hooks her fingers and thrusts into Emma more forcefully, pressing into her clit and causing the other woman's hips to buck even harder against her.

The shallow, gasping breaths come faster and faster until, with a loud moan, Emma collapses back onto the bed, her chest heaving but her hips finally still.

Regina allows herself to exhale, too, and collapses on top of the blonde, who meets her lips with a tired kiss.

"Geez," Emma murmurs once she's caught her breath, "for someone who claims to be some kind of forty-year old virgin, that was pretty fantastic."

"I never claimed to be a virgin," Regina protests. "In fact, I think I very specifically said I was not."

Emma rolls onto her side and shakes her head, smiling. "No, I just mean...I *assumed* that you had never had sex with a woman before, based on...well, just based on what I knew. But it seems like I was wrong."

"One of the first rules of police work, Detective Swan, is to never make assumptions. Have you been away from the force so long that you've already forgotten that?"

"You did mention once that you had magic fingers," Emma muses with a throaty chuckle. "Is it bad that I get absurdly turned on when you call me Detective Swan?"

"Would you like me to use my magic fingers again?" Regina offers, raising one eyebrow.

"And here I was, thinking you'd like me to use mine."

Regina widens her eyes in mock surprise. "Your fingers are magic, too, Detective Swan? Well then, I'd say we make quite the pair."

"Oh yeah," Emma teases, rolling Regina onto her back with a satisfied smirk. "You have no idea what I'm capable of, Detective Mills."

"Then shut up and show me," Regina growls, silencing Emma by pressing their lips together. She feels Emma laugh into her mouth and for some reason *that's* what brings the heat between her legs to unbearable levels, and her clothes can't come off fast enough.

She's pushing her pants down when Emma starts unbuttoning her shirt and laying a trail of increasingly forceful kisses down from her neck and onto her chest. The blonde's fingers are exploring, running along every inch of skin on her abdomen, until suddenly they encounter a bump and pause.

Regina freezes.

There's a sharp, searing pain in her gut and a garbled scream that she doesn't feel herself produce but recognizes instantly as her own piercing the air, and before either she or Emma know what's happening, Regina rolls off the bed and curls into a tight ball on the floor, stomach and throat both burning.

"I'm going to change your bandages now, honey," the nurse says in an almost patronizingly soothing tone. "It might hurt a little when I put on the ointment, but it'll be over in just a second. You might not want to look."

Regina sighs. How weak and broken could they possibly think she is? She's a homicide detective; she's seen a bit of gore before.

The nurse gently removes the dressing from her wound and dabs something on it with a cotton swab, and it stings a bit but it's nothing she can't handle. Regina wonders how bad it could possibly be and takes a peek down.

She barely recognizes the red and oozing gash, the puckered skin of her formerly taut and swollen belly, as her own flesh, and suddenly she feels a sharp burst of sheer agony as the cool blade of White's knife cuts into her, and she sees the gush of blood and amniotic fluid swimming in front of her eyes as he stands over her with an ugly sneer. Her knuckles make hard contact with flesh and he disappears, as does the sensation of touch on her abdomen.

He's gone, and she thinks she should feel relief, but he's only injured, not dead, and the pounding in her head doesn't fade. She wishes whoever keeps screaming "No" over and over would quiet down so she could remember where she left her gun, but the agonized sound doesn't stop.

Soon it starts to mingle with frantic sobs and she realizes it's coming from her.

"Regina? Regina!"

Emma's voice, coming from above and then beside her, tries to call her back to reality.

Emma's fingers reach hesitantly to touch her shoulder, but Regina recoils and another anguished cry comes from deep in her chest.

"Regina, I'm sorry," Emma says desperately. "What happened? What did I do?"

Nothing. You did nothing. This is on me, Regina wants to reassure her, but the noise she makes instead sounds more like the wail of a dying cat.

She presses her fingernails frantically into her wrist, not caring if she draws blood. She has to snap out of this before she causes irreversible damage to this fragile and beautiful thing she has with Emma.

She probably already has.

Why can't you let me be happy? she tearfully demands of her brain as she bangs her head against the bed frame. *Why now, when I was finally alright?*

"Regina!" Emma gasps, grabbing a pillow to shield Regina's skull before she unintentionally shatters it. "Regina, please, let me help you. Tell me what I can do?"

She reaches blindly out and grasps Emma's hand, tugging the younger woman harshly toward her. "Shower," she grits out. "Cold shower."

"Ow," Emma says with a wince. "Yeah, okay, shower."

Remaining remarkably stoic, Emma helps Regina stand with minimal physical contact (she's still clutching Emma like a lifeline, and the part of her awareness that's starting to reconnect to the present realizes with a pang of guilt that it might be her bad arm) and guides her into the bathroom.

She thinks she hears a sigh of relief as she dislodges her fingers from Emma's hand and stumbles into the shower with her clothes still on. "Regina, I'll...I'll just be out here if you need me, okay?"

Regina desperately to draw in enough oxygen, but her breaths are growing quicker and shallower as she shivers from the frigid water pouring over her body.

She's at Emma's apartment. Not the hospital. Not her bedroom. White is not here to attack her.

She leans against the wall of the shower and stares down angrily at the offending scar. It wasn't good enough for him to take away her love, her pride, her hope; no, he had to leave a mark, too, one that would never fade no matter how many creams and ointments she tried to use, so that she could never forget the exact moment her entire life was stolen from her.

So that she could never forget the depth of her weakness.

Slamming the side of her body against the wall, she yanks open the remaining buttons of her shirt and digs her nails into her stomach, scratching and clawing until she knows for sure that the pain she feels there is coming from her body rather than her mind.

It's not enough. It's never enough.

Her entire body trembling violently from cold and rage, she rips her engagement ring off of its chain and thrusts the diamond into the newly puffy and tender tissue.

It hurts.

It hurts so much that it releases all of the tension built up inside of her in one long, bloodcurdling scream that sends Emma sprinting into the bathroom, eyes blazing with panic.

"What are you – Regina, no!" she shrieks, restraining Regina's wrists so she can't hurt herself any further.

Her fight response is strong, but her body is exhausted, and she allows herself to collapse, shuddering, into Emma's arms, torn between comfort and self-loathing as her partner whispers soft reassurances and tenderly runs her fingers through her hair.

"Emma, I'm sorry," she chokes in the moments she can catch her breath between the sobs and shivers wracking her entire frame.

"S'okay," Emma murmurs. "You're okay. I'm here."

"C-c-cold."

"Yeah, okay, let me just get you a towel and some dry clothes." Thinking quickly, she pushes down the toilet cover and motions for Regina to sit.

"I'm sorry," Regina repeats again, burying her pounding head in her hands, elbows rested on soaked pants.

"I'm fine; don't worry about it," Emma replies tersely, handing Regina a fluffy towel and faded flannel robe. "I'll be in the bedroom."

She doesn't sound fine, Regina thinks as the bathroom door closes and she stares tiredly at the towel on the floor, unsure whether she has the strength necessary to undress herself, let alone dry off and return to face whatever's waiting for her in Emma's bedroom. But she sees her lips in the mirror and they're starting to turn blue, so she forces numb and clumsy hands to take everything off and wrap herself in the robe. It's soft and warm, and it has a smell that she can't quite place but is so unmistakably *Emma* that it calms her.

Still shivering, she cracks the door open and sees the blonde reclining on the bed, wincing as she massages her still-healing shoulder (the one Regina had apparently tried to tug out of its socket).

"Hey, you need a blanket?" she offers, shifting to the side to make room for Regina on the bed.

"I'm sorry, Emma," Regina whispers. "I'm so sorry. I – I'll just go home and stop...I don't want to trouble you."

She starts walking, slowly and unsteadily, toward the door, but Emma quickly jumps up and stands in her way.

"Okay, seriously?" she demands. "Look, it's not 'troubling me' if you have flashbacks. That's what that was, right? I mean, it's not like you can control them. But you are seriously deluded if you think I'm just gonna let you drive yourself home now."

"I'm fine," Regina insists, although she's certain the slight waver in her voice instantly gives away the lie. "I've been dealing with this for years, Emma. I can continue to do so on my own."

She tries to walk out again, but Emma blocks her.

"I can't let you do that," the younger woman insists. "Please, Regina. You don't have to do this alone. Let me help you."

"You can't."

"Then at least let me see with my own eyes that you're okay. Stay here tonight? For me?"

"You don't want me in bed with you tonight," Regina says dully. *I don't want me in bed with you tonight.* "I can't be trusted to...not to scream and kick and further reinjure you." But deep in her heart, she doesn't want to go home alone either, so she decides, "I'll sleep on your couch."

"Okay," Emma agrees. Wordlessly, she strides to Henry's room, grabs the blanket and pillow, and deposits them onto the couch before sitting down on the floor next to it.

"What are you doing?" Regina asks.

Emma shrugs one shoulder and chews at her lower lip. "I did this," she whispers, tears springing to her eyes. "I'm not leaving you."

"Emma, you didn't do this," Regina whispers, blinking back tears as a huge lump rises in her throat. "I – it was my fault. I should have told

you. I – please, don't for a second think any of this is your fault. I'm just...broken. Just go to sleep and don't worry about me."

Emma sighs and watches Regina sadly as she lies down, tugging Henry's blanket up so it covers all of her except her eyes and the very top of her head.

"You're not broken," Emma insists. "And I won't leave you."

Regina squeezes her eyes shut as ragged, painful sobs force their way out of her throat. She's failed everything today. Her job, her relationship – she wonders how many things are left for her to ruin. Eventually, she succumbs to the fatigue and drifts off, assuming that the younger woman will eventually see reason and go to sleep in her own bed.

But then when she wakes up a few hours later, screaming for Daniel, she feels Emma's gentle hands running up and down her back and hears a soft voice telling her that she's safe and everything is alright.

"Emma?" she croaks, one hand reaching out from under the covers and grasping at the air for something solid to ground her.

Then there's warm skin against her trembling palm, the tip of a thumb caressing her knuckles, and she exhales slowly.

"I'm right here," Emma promises. "I'm not leaving you."

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all, as always, for all the feedback and all the love you continue to show me and this fic! Thank you for your patience as the updates become a bit more spaced out. No one is sadder about it than me, let me assure you. And special thanks to supernana494 over on tumblr (go check her out!) for the amazing cover art she made! If you like it as much as I do, please send her a message to say how beautiful it is. (Also, I'm into-themists on tumblr, if you're looking for semi-random blogs to follow.)

Emma's infernal chirping birds wake her up at 4:45 on Saturday, and it takes a full minute of confusion before she recalls that she had originally planned to go on her first post-injury run this morning. She had intentionally caused herself this annoyance. Wonderful.

It takes another few moments after that to realize that her usual running buddy sleeping on top of her might cause a slight wrinkle in her plans. She remembers crawling onto the couch with Regina sometime during or shortly after nightmare number three, but how they got into this position is beyond her. As is how she's going to get out of it.

Regina's head is nestled in the crook of Emma's neck and warm breath is coming deep and slow from her nose, faintly pleasant on Emma's skin in the cool early-morning air. She barely stirs at the sound of the alarm

before sagging even more contentedly against her sleeping companion, every muscle of her face and body completely relaxed.

Emma sighs and swipes a finger across the screen of her phone to silence the alarm. This is the first time she's *ever* seen Regina like this, every bit of the tension she wears like a second skin entirely dissipated, and after last night, she wouldn't have thought it possible. *Last night,* she remembers, heart sinking. A flicker of guilt burns in the pit of her stomach, and the soreness in her shoulder serves as an unpleasant reminder of what she'd caused with her carelessness.

You can't just touch people's scars, she scolds herself furiously.

Not that she had *meant* to touch it. Her hands had been moving independently of her mind, which was focused on...well, on other things. Things like breasts and lips and the heat rolling off of both of them in waves and the desire eating her from the inside out and distracting her from the fact Regina has baggage. Baggage in the form of a massive scar across her belly that apparently triggers horrific flashbacks when touched.

She shouldn't have lingered on it. She'd just – she hadn't been thinking, obviously. Her hand had been tracing the lines of Regina's fairly exquisite abs, encountered something it hadn't expected, and stopped of its own accord. She'd known, of course, of the scar's existence, and it had been fairly simple to guess its origin. But still, *that* reaction had been unexpected, to say the least.

Well, now she knows.

And god, she feels awful.

Apparently she'd only put her alarm on snooze instead of turning it all the way off, because within moments, the birds are chirping again, and this time she's not quick enough to silence them to avoid waking Regina.

Foggy brown eyes blink several times and glance around the room, disoriented, before finally finding focus on Emma's jaw line.

"What time is it?" Regina murmurs sleepily.

Grimacing in apology, Emma replies, "Ten to five."

It takes Regina a minute to process. "Running time," she finally deduces, pushing herself stiffly off of the couch, careful to avoid any contact with Emma's newly sore shoulder. So she remembers that, at least.

"Right, but, you know...you don't have to. I mean, last night was a little rough, so if you're not..."

Pushing herself up on her elbows, Emma trails off and watches with bated breath for a reaction. Something akin to shame flits across Regina's face, and for a split second Emma worries that she's about to crumble, but then her eyes harden and she shakes her head.

"I'll be fine, dear," she says dismissively before her voice suddenly falters, and she adds in a strained whisper, "Unless...unless you'd prefer if I didn't..."

"What, no? Are you kidding?" Emma immediately exclaims. "I need you. You're, like, my running guru, and it's my first time back on the trail after the whole getting shot situation. I haven't trained in a month. I'd probably stupidly injure myself without you."

"We can't have that," Regina agrees. "I should have a pair of running shoes in my car, if..." she stops and stares down at the robe she's still wearing until apparently putting the pieces together in her mind and squeezing her eyes shut dejectedly.

"You want me to lend you some clothes to walk down to the car in?" Emma offers. "I mean, I doubt anyone's going to see you at this hour, but it's probably a good idea to be semi-presentable, right?"

Staring down at her hands, Regina mutters. "That would be lovely."

She borrows a t-shirt, shorts, and a sports bra from Emma's room and jogs barefoot down to the curb, leaving the younger woman alone to

heave a sigh of relief. *As far as mornings-after go*, Emma thinks, *it hasn't been too bad...yet.*

Especially considering all that had happened.

But, then again, they're going to eventually have to talk about it. As much as she'd like to run screaming in the other direction and never touch this topic again with a forty-foot pole, they're already at a point where that's no longer a feasible option. She wonders if Regina realizes that.

Or had she not intended to return when she rushed out to her car? Is she going to speed off into the sunrise, never to be heard from again?

No, she's back, if the jiggling sound from the front door is to be believed.

Her cheeks flushed from either embarrassment or the bite of the still-cool breeze outside – Emma's not quite sure which, or whether she even wants to know – Regina inquires, "How far were you thinking of going this morning?" She carefully avoids Emma's eyes as she laces her sneakers, keeping her voice and expression carefully neutral.

Emma shrugs. "Definitely not the full ten miles," she says decisively. "I was thinking of just playing it by ear, you know? Stop when I start feeling awful."

"I'd probably advise stopping slightly *before* you start feeling 'awful,'" Regina teases, a tiny smirk tugging at the edges of her lips. "What if we plan for three miles, and if you're still going strong, we can add more? One lesson I've learned over the years is that it's important not to overdo it on the first day, or there might not be a second." As she stops to think over her words, she grimaces and adds regretfully, "That lesson is also applicable to other areas, and it's one I apparently never fully learned."

"Three?" Emma whines. She plops down dejectedly on the couch and kicks the toe of one shoe against the heel of the other. "That's barely anything."

"Your pout right now looks suspiciously similar to your son's when denied ice cream," remarks Regina. "I should take a picture and send it to him."

"Yeah, I know, I just...I felt like I was getting really fit, and then I lost it, you know?"

"Getting shot can do that to you." Regina sits down next to Emma on the couch and pats her knee, offering a tight-lipped, sympathetic smile. "But it'll come back. It always comes back."

"Is this another one of your life lessons?"

Regina sighs. "Maybe, but I believe this one is applicable to fitness and not much else."

"I don't know," Emma offers cautiously. "I mean, you're the running guru, not me, but I think it could be applicable to other things, too."

Regina stares hard at her for a moment before sighing again. "Let's just go running, Detective Swan."

"As you wish, Your Majesty. We wouldn't want to miss your sunrise. What?" she demands in response to Regina's surprised expression. "I listen when you say things. We've talked about this before."

"Have we?" Regina mutters before shrugging her shoulders almost imperceptibly. "Let's just...let's run quietly."

Emma nods in agreement before silently following her partner out the door and down to the river. Regina sets a pace that feels almost painfully slow at first, but after about a mile, it starts to feel painful in a different way. Emma tries not to start lagging – she really, really tries – but, of course, Regina notices almost immediately that something behind her isn't right.

"Is your shoulder cramping?" she demands, coming to an immediate halt.

"Yeah," Emma mutters. She winces as she tries to stretch the tight muscles before scowling and letting her left arm hang limply by her side. "What the hell? I'm *running* – using my legs, not my shoulder."

"You've been holding your arms very tensely, though," Regina observes. "That could do it. And I imagine you might be a bit sore from..." her voice trails off and she ducks her head in shame, but not before Emma notices the slight shimmer in her eyes and once again feels awful.

"Nah, I bet it's just the tension thing," she says quickly. "I've had that problem for a while, right?"

"I don't remember."

"Maybe your magic fingers could make it better?" Emma ventures with a tentative smile. "I mean, if you don't mind."

"Of course." Regina motions for Emma to stand beside the trail with her and starts gently massaging the knots out of her shoulder. "These muscles are very tight," she observes. "Has your physical therapist given you stretches to do?"

Of course he had, and she'd been doing them religiously, too, but last night...

Not that she'd even consider bringing that up.

"I think he needs to give me more," she mumbles.

She hears Regina's tired huff from behind her head. "Emma, you can just say it," she challenges. "I won't...shatter, or anything."

"Say what?" Emma asks, feigning ignorance. As much as she knows this needs to be discussed, she was hoping (apparently, futilely) that it wouldn't need to be right away, in the middle of a public running trail, before either of them has had any coffee.

"That I hurt you!" Regina exclaims. "And that...that's unacceptable! How is this – our relationship – how is it going to work if you just allow me to...how can you still be with me, acting as though nothing has changed, when I did this to you?"

"Regina," Emma sighs.

"Being with me isn't healthy for you, Emma. I'm...whatever you see in me, I'm not worth all the pain it's going to cause you, and I was stupid not to realize that."

"Regina, no." Emma shrugs the other woman's hands off of her shoulder and spins around to hold them tightly. "If anything, I'm the one who hurt

you. I was the one who – I mean, I guess if you want to be fair, you can say that we both hurt each other. We both sort of...forgot ourselves, and our agreement to take things slow."

"We did," Regina agrees. "And I think most of that was my fault. I'm so sorry."

"No need to apologize for good sex," Emma jokes before quickly becoming serious again. "I still think that what I did was worse, but I don't think it's worth arguing over which of us hurt the other more. I mean, we're both sorry, obviously."

"We both hurt each other," Regina says in a whisper.

"So, what do we do?"

"I have no idea. What do you want to do?"

"There's part of me that wants to cut and run," Emma admits apologetically. *"Not* because you hurt me – I mean, it's just a little muscle strain; it'll heal – but because I'm afraid of hurting you again. I – I'm really scared of that."

Regina sighs. "And the rest of you?"

"The rest of me wants to be with you, no matter what."

"Even if we sometimes hurt each other?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know. Are you willing to risk it?"

"I've never been good at knowing what I want," Regina admits, "but I think...yes. For now, anyway."

"For now," agrees Emma, nodding vigorously. "Maybe we can talk more about it later."

"We'll have to." Regina stares at her hands for a moment, twisting them in the hem of Emma's oversized t-shirt to hide their trembling. "So, now what?"

"Now we run?" Emma suggests. "I mean, like, physically, running." She gestures down the path at the slowly brightening horizon and adds, "The sun'll be coming up soon."

Regina nods and exhales. "Yes, it will."

This time, Emma sets the pace, and it's even slower than before, but Regina doesn't complain. They watch and jog, silently as the warm rays of the sun gradually begin to appear over the tops of the buildings until everything is covered with a faint, pink glow.

Emma sneaks a glance back and sees a single tear trickling down Regina's cheek and realizes with a start that her own eyes are a little moist, as well.

She wipes them and continues running.

xx

"You no longer seem strangely happy," Nolan observes when Regina staggers into the station later on Saturday morning, weighed down with coffee orders for the entire squad. (The shocked barista had exclaimed, "But Detective Mills, that's so *nice* of you!" when she'd gone and ordered everyone's usual, and Regina had stared at her feet in shame, because apparently guilt, had turned her into Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning. Does that make Emma her ghost of Christmas future?)

"You still seem depressed and lacking in social grace," she growls under her breath. "One cream, two sugars, right?"

Surprised, her temporary partner murmurs his thanks before his eyes narrow in suspicion. "Why are you doing this?" he demands. "It's not poisoned, is it?"

"No, although that would certainly be an effective way to shut you up," Regina sighs. "This is an apology for leaving you all hanging last night."

"We weren't really hanging," David says with a shrug. "I mean, everyone knows your schedule. But your apology is gratefully accepted, and I offer you one of my own for falsely accusing you of attempted murder."

Regina dismisses him with a wave of her hand. "It's alright," she says tiredly. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't fantasized about doing all of you in at least once."

"That's comforting."

She distributes the remaining coffees to the rest of the squad, who all respond with varying degrees of shock and consternation, before asking Nolan, "So, what did I miss?"

"Not much," he groans. "A bunch of anonymous tips that led nowhere – no surprise. We haven't even gotten any ID for the victims."

"Victims? Plural?" Regina asks, raising her eyebrows.

"Whale's still waiting on DNA testing, obviously, but there are two different blood types he's found so far: O-negative and A-negative. So, two victims, at least."

"A victim and an attacker?"

"No blood trail, no sign of struggle. It seems unlikely the that attacker was injured, too, unless there was an accomplice. It gets complicated."

"Well, we know the motive definitely wasn't kidnapping," Regina mutters. "How is the baby, by the way?"

"Uninjured, as far as we can tell. Well-nourished, well-cared for. She'd been hungry for hours, not days or weeks or anything. DCS brought her to the clinic last night – clean bill of health. On target with all her developmental milestones for her estimated age. And now she's with a temporary foster family until we can figure out what happened to her parents."

"Our working theory is that the victims were her parents? Or at least one of them."

"Parents or guardians, yeah. It's possible; impossible to say for sure until, you know, we figure out who they were in the first place."

"What about reports of a missing child?"

"Nothing." Nolan sighs and slumps down in his chair, burying his face in his hands. "We told the guys at Missing Persons to send us anything that came up about a child under one year old or couples with young children, but there's been nothing."

Regina nods, lips tight. "Which supports our theory that the victims were her parents," she adds, somewhat unnecessarily, "because if they weren't –"

"Someone would have reported her missing, yeah," Nolan agrees. "This was no abandoned or neglected child – someone was taking really good care of her."

"Poor kid," Regina whispers.

Nolan forces a smile. "Well, we can just hope that we'll find her parents before the unthinkable happens, or worst-case scenario, she gets a nice adoptive family, and this whole ordeal is over before she's old enough to remember it."

"No."

"No?"

Regina shakes her head and glares at him. "No," she repeats, "we can't just hope that. We've both been around the block enough times to know that the world doesn't work like that. You saw the blood at the crime scene: people don't survive injuries like that. They just...don't. And babies can get tossed around the foster system where they're neglected and abused, and maybe they never find a family their entire lives, and then they turn eighteen and end up on the streets with no support system."

"Wow," Nolan murmurs, staring at her with surprise and something that resembles fear. "If you were trying to make my depression better, you didn't."

"I wasn't," hisses Regina. "Your idiotic 'depression' is because a woman who is obviously in love with you claims that she isn't, and you're too wrapped up in your fragile ego to actually talk to her about it instead of whining to the person who likely cares the least. I'm trying to make you focus on real-world issues."

"I *have* talked to her about it!" Nolan exclaims, the volume of his voice increasing as his agitation mounts. "She said she never loved me – that she wasn't *capable* of loving me! Who even says that?"

Voice calm but eyes flashing dangerously, Regina replies, "Perhaps you just weren't listening clearly."

"I was listening, Regina, I just told you what she said."

"Maybe you were listening, Nolan, but you obviously didn't hear. I don't know what else to say to you. Now, shall we address the issue of you coming to *me,* of all people for dating advice? If you're hoping for an unbiased female analysis of your break-up with ADA Blanchard, Swan might be a better choice."

"That's not a bad – wait! How did you know about Mary Margaret and me?" he demands, and Regina mentally kicks herself for letting her anger get in the way of her ability to keep a secret. "You've barely even been at work, and you never -"

"Would it mean anything to you if I told you that I'm a detective?"

Nolan scowls. "It doesn't matter," he grumbles. "Let's get back to the case."

"So, as I was saying before you derailed our discussion of a child's welfare with your own personal issues," Regina says haughtily, "the foster system in this country has a lot of issues, and it's possible our missing baby may never have a permanent home."

"And as I was saying," Nolan says through gritted teeth, "you have an incredibly pessimistic perspective. She's under a year old, Caucasian, and she doesn't have any physical or mental issues, or at least none that have been detected yet. Assuming the parents are dead – which, as you pointed out, they must be – and there's no relatives fighting for custody, she's basically the prime candidate for a quick adoption."

"Except sometimes that doesn't matter," Regina sighs, thinking of Emma. "Sometimes none of it matters."

But thinking of Emma brings on a whole slew of other thoughts that she's not prepared to address while still focusing on work, so she pushes her concerns about baby Jane Doe and the foster system aside.

The remainder of the day is spent dealing with paperwork from the crime scene and following up on the few anonymous tips that don't sound like they came from pranksters or completely unhinged people. They discover that several residents who lived near the park had seen an unfamiliar van driving around the area late on Thursday night, but none of the descriptions are consistent enough to give them something to look for.

"Are half of the people in this city colorblind?" Jones demands. "How can you not tell whether a van was gray or white or blue?"

"It was dark?" Humbert offers with a shrug. "Although it does seem strange to confuse white and navy, even in low light."

Regina doesn't even protest when Locksley kicks her out at four o'clock on the dot. Even with her full responsibilities restored, she just can't shake how useless she feels at work these days. It's not until she's in the car, stopped at the intersection where the route to her apartment diverges from the route to Emma's, that she allows herself to finally acknowledge the mess she's made of her personal life, and that just makes everything worse.

She can't do her job, or at least what she's always believed the function of her job should be. She can't return that poor lost child to her family or protect her from the pain of a broken bureaucracy that, rightly or wrongly, coldly decides the fates of people's lives.

She can't give Emma what she obviously wants – what she *deserves* – in a relationship. She can't even keep her demons at bay for long enough to go on a single date.

If she's a failure as a cop, a failure as a lover...what else does she have?

Does she turn right and go to Emma's and face whatever this is? Or does she turn left and go home, alone and defeated?

The light turns green and she's still not sure, so she just keeps driving straight, waiting for some kind of sign.

xx

The sign comes in the form of a text from Emma, inviting her to a romantic evening of cereal and super hero movies. Regina laughs and drops by the store to pick up some ingredients for a salad and a simple spaghetti sauce before driving back to Emma's apartment. As certain as she is that the younger woman actually *will* eat cereal for dinner (and probably even enjoy it), improving Emma's eating habits is the one area she knows she can have a positive impact.

"What's all this?" Emma asks, eyeing the grocery bag suspiciously. She's still in her running clothes, for some reason – Regina supposes it's acceptable because she didn't get *that* sweaty, jogging three miles at their almost glacial pace – and already stuffing her mouth with Cocoa Puffs.

"As much as you'd like to believe your twenty-something metabolism and overall good health will last forever, it won't," Regina says shortly. "Foods with fiber and antioxidants are your friends."

"So, what you're saying is that I should eat my friends?" Emma asks incredulously before chortling to herself at her incredibly bad joke.

Regina sighs. "You seem happy," she remarks, trying not to let envy creep into her voice.

"I am. I got my daily endorphin rush for the first time in over a month, Neal just called to say he has to come to Boston the day after Henry gets back from camp, so I get to see him a week earlier than I thought, and now you're here – although you're kind of ruining our date with all these comments about nutrition."

"This is a date?"

"Isn't it? Are we –" Emma's voice suddenly falters as her face is stricken with horror. "We are still dating, aren't we?" she asks, as meekly as Regina has ever heard her ask anything. "I didn't – I mean..."

"I didn't mean that," Regina replies quickly. "I must meant...cereal and Thor? That's a date?"

"Oh." Emma sags against the doorframe, her relief palpable. "It's a casual, pressure-free date. We can eat some sugary, nutrition-less breakfast food, watch a giant Scandinavian guy throw hammers at bad guys, and, you know...talk. About things we need to talk about."

"Right." Regina deposits her grocery bag on the kitchen counter and wraps her arms around herself. Talking. She knows what Emma *should* say – that their relationship is healthy and healing for Regina, but not for her, and she's getting out of it and finding someone who actually deserves her – but that doesn't seem to be where this conversation is going. Still, she's prepared for the worst. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Eating first, then talking," demands Emma. "You've been chasing after criminals all day; you must be hungry."

"Fine. If we're having a breakfast food themed date, then can I at least make eggs? Protein is very important."

Emma rolls her eyes. "Milk has protein," she says impatiently. "Stop complaining, put on some comfortable clothes, and eat your Cocoa Puffs. We have a busy night ahead of us."

Defeated, though not entirely upset about it, Regina grabs a clean t-shirt and a pair of leggings from Emma's closet. It occurs to her that she should probably bring over some of her own clothes if she's going to keep spending so much time here (and it subsequently occurs to her that maybe all the time she's spending here is too much, too soon, like everything else she and Emma are doing), but she forces it out of her mind for now. She's about to exit the bedroom and eat her Cocoa Puffs with Emma when she catches sight of *it*, hanging on the closet door.

Emma's red leather jacket.

Formerly (briefly) Regina's jacket – though she can't really claim it because she'd never worn the hideous garment before giving it away.

She hasn't seen it since the first day Emma wore it to the station, when she'd apparently thoroughly scared the younger woman out of ever being seen in public with it again. And honestly, she hasn't thought about it

much since then – Emma's story of meeting Daniel had evoked far more pressing memories.

But now, she looks at it – looks *hard* – and she imagines sweet, young Emma (Well, Regina imagines her as sweet, but she was probably tough as nails: maybe even tougher than the is now, since she's had ten years of being a mother to soften her.), cold and alone and frightened about her future. And she imagines Daniel, with his friendly, comforting smile, feeding her donuts and giving her the jacket to stay warm, probably making some jokes about Regina's early-pregnancy crabbiness in the process.

And then, the vague ghost of a memory starts to come back to her in bits and pieces: Daniel coming home one evening in February, placing one kiss on her lips and one on her belly as he'd started doing the second they'd discovered she was pregnant. "I have amazing news!" he'd exclaimed. "I found the perfect girls' name. What do you think about our baby being an Emma?"

Our baby. He'd always said "*our* baby," from the very beginning, even knowing that the absolute shit show that was Regina's undercover assignment meant that the baby had at least a fifty-percent chance of being the offspring of a serial killer.

"It doesn't matter," he'd insisted. "Not to me. If you don't want to keep it, I'll understand, but if you do, then just know that DNA means nothing to me. Our baby will always have a loving father, no matter what we find out."

She strokes her finger along the soft leather and thinks that he was too good for her. Then again, so is Emma.

Emma's voice voice floats in from the bedroom door, calling her back to the present, and Regina can hear her smile without even turning around. "Hey, did you get lost or something? I know this apartment's pretty massive, but I'd have thought you'd know your way around by now."

Hand still touching the jacket, Regina murmurs, "I want you to wear this."

"Now?" Emma asks. "It's July."

"I meant when it gets cold again. I know I said – well, anyway, you shouldn't be afraid to wear it. I no longer think it's unprofessional. Ignore everything I said before."

Emma smirks. "It's okay if you hate it. We don't have to share the same fashion sense, although I have to say you do look pretty good in my pajamas."

"I don't hate it," Regina declares. "Not anymore. I love it."

"You love Daniel," Emma corrects, and Regina smiles sadly.

"And I love you."

The words fly out of her mouth before she can stop them, and suddenly the air feels heavy, thick with emotion and all the words they've said and the words they still need to say filling the space between them like a thick wall that seems paralyzingly insurmountable.

Emma swallows. Regina stares at her feet.

"We need to talk," Regina whispers, voice raspy and full of regret. "I think Thor and my Cocoa Puffs are going to have to wait."

"Yeah." Sighing, Emma deposits her new bowl of cereal on her bedside table and perches on the edge of the mattress, beckoning Regina to join her. "Do you want to go first or should I?"

Regina stares at her hands and says hollowly, "It's been two days."

"Yeah, it has," Emma agrees.

"And we're - *I'm* - not very good at this."

"You think I'm any better? Regina, I gave you the flashback. I touched your scar. The whole thing was my fault, and I'm so sorry."

"No, it was mine. I should have realized - I should have told you. It's...it's just never come up before, and in the moment, I forgot. I forgot myself. It's not your job to know all of my *triggers."* She spits the word out like it tastes bitter on her tongue, and in a way, it does. Five years without a flashback and then two in just over a month – and during what should have been, by all accounts, and enjoyable experience for both of them.

"That's the thing, though," Emma says slowly, gently taking hold of Regina's hand. "If this – if we want this to go somewhere, then yeah, it is my job. I mean, you have to tell me, obviously, but if I want to be with you, it's my job to know. And I do, Regina. I do want to be with you. We've already established that, but I'll say it again: I want this. Even if it sometimes hurts, I don't want to run away yet."

The pressure behind her eyes is starting to feel suspiciously like an oncoming rush of tears, and she's shed far too many of those in the last few days, so Regina stubbornly tightens her jaw and mutters, "So, what should we do?"

Emma shrugs, and Regina is reminded that she's the one who is supposed to be experienced in healthy relationships, which is perhaps the most terrifying thought she's ever had. Still, the younger woman is putting in an honest effort. "We said we were going to take it slow," she reminds Regina. "And then we went and had sex after the first date – which, in my past, has been pretty normal, but I'm guessing that's not the case for the rest of the world."

"Maybe not."

"But then, I don't know if the rest of the world's standards necessarily have to apply to us," Emma continues. "They don't, do they? I mean, I'm different, you're different, our relationship is different. It can just be what we want it to be, and we don't have to worry about what anyone else thinks. Am I rambling?"

"I think I understand what you're saying," Regina reassures her. "But we do still have to talk about what we want it to be."

"I'm pretty much shit at talking," Emma sighs. "About relationships, feelings, any of it."

"You're not doing too badly so far – at least, as far as I'm concerned. But then again, I'm probably even worse than talking about my feelings than you are."

"We have to set boundaries," Emma declares suddenly. "I learned about it in one of my group homes. In healthy relationships, there have to be clear boundaries about what does and doesn't work. So, touching your scar doesn't work. Now we know."

"But if we make a rule that you can never touch my scar, then how are we supposed to do...you know?"

"Sex? We don't. I mean, not right away. We'll just, like, stay fully clothed together for a while until we figure out a way to deal with it."

"That's easier said than done," Regina mutters, unsure if she's angrier about the fact that she won't be having sex with Emma again anytime soon or that it's her own mental state that's preventing her from having something she so desperately wants.

Emma chews her lower lip, deep in thought. "You're still seeing Dr. Hopper, right?" she asks, and Regina nods. "Maybe he has some ideas. I'm sure there've been other triggers he's helped you deal with over the years, right?"

"Yes, but..." Regina trails off and stares at her hands again. "Those weren't...I don't talk to him about my sex life. I don't think that's part of our relationship."

"He's a therapist; he's supposed to help you with whatever you need," Emma argues. "And maybe you don't need to tell him why desensitization or whatever it's called is necessary, right? It's worth a shot."

Regina sighs and buries her face in the hand that Emma isn't holding.

"So much for the whole fairytale ideal of love being easy and everyone living happily ever after," the blonde mutters with a dark laugh.

"Do you think it's possible?" Regina asks sadly. "Being happy?"

"I mean, the past few days have had a lot of pretty good moments."

"Dr. Hopper said something to me about accepting the bad moments and focusing on the good ones," recalls Regina. "But it's been difficult, when there are so many bad ones."

"Yeah, you and I both seem to be magnets for the bad ones."

"But we've also had some good ones."

"We have," Emma agrees. "So let's do what Dr. Hopper said and focus on them."

"I liked everything about last night," Regina admits, "until – until the flashback. And I liked waking up with you this morning."

Emma nods. "We could probably make that happen again – the waking up together part. But maybe this time we can do it somewhere more

comfortable."

"I would like that."

"Good – so, now can we do Thor and Cocoa Puffs and maybe a little snuggling?" At the expression on Regina's face, Emma heaves an exasperated sigh. "Can you please not ruin this good moment with your unnecessary comments about nutritional value?"

Regina laughs and follows Emma to the living room, still hand-in-hand.

That night, they fall asleep in each other's arms, and she thinks that maybe she can accept all the flashbacks and drama if she can just have this every night.

But then again, she used to have this. And she lost it.

The problem with good moments, she realizes, is that they're over far too soon.

xx

Regina graciously allows Emma to run four miles on Monday morning. They're slow, but she still feels strong by the end of it, and as her running guru points out, that's what's important.

"You did it," Regina remarks while they're stretching. "Back to running, back to work – stronger than ever, just like you said you'd be."

"That'll teach you not to doubt me," Emma teases, "especially when I've got Regina Mills on my team." Regina's chews thoughtfully at her lower lip, and after a few seconds of debate, Emma leans in and kisses her. They both taste like sweat, but somehow that makes everything better.

When they break apart, Regina reminds her, "You know, at the station...I've told Locksley and he was fine with it, but no one else knows anything, so I'd like to be discreet about...things like that."

"Relax, I know. We've talked about this: I won't do anything that's going to cost both of us our jobs, but if you're ever feeling the need for a secret rendezvous in the ladies' room..."

She smirks, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, and Regina's cheeks pale before turning slightly green.

"In the bathroom? That's disgusting."

Emma laughs loudly and wraps her good arm around the other woman's shoulders. "I was kidding - maybe. Do you want to grab a cup of coffee and some sub-par donuts before we head to work?"

"I'd love to," Regina replies, "but we do have to allow time for both of us to shower, or for me to drive home, since my car is still at your place."

With a dismissive shrug, Emma says, "We can shower fast – I'm sure you've got it in you, even with all that conditioner you use. Or, you know, we could shower together."

She's smiling when she says it, but Regina sucks in a sharp breath as her hands drift almost unconsciously to her stomach, protectively covering the area of her scar, and Emma feels awful yet again.

Right, no naked activities, she remembers belatedly, *for now.*

"Or we could just take really quick, separate showers," she says loudly. Too loudly. "Come on, we need caffeine so I don't make any more stupid suggestions."

"It wasn't stupid," Regina murmurs, but neither of them says anything else until they're ordering their coffee at Dunkin' Donuts, and then they walk back to Emma's apartment in silence. Regina gets in the shower

first, and Emma mentally berates herself as she munches on her donut, wondering if she'll ever be able to stop from putting her foot in her mouth long enough for this relationship to actually work.

Regina is mostly silent on the drive to the station, seemingly lost in thought. "I'm scheduled to meet with Dr. Hopper on Monday mornings," she informs Emma once they arrive. "I can walk you to the squad room, if you'd like me to, but..."

She sucks in a deep breath and watches for the younger woman's reaction. Emma shrugs. "You can if you want to. I don't think I'll get lost."

"I know, I just...I don't want you to get nervous. It's your first day back, and-"

Glancing furtively around the parking garage first, Emma leans in and plants a kiss on Regina's lips to cut her off. "That might be the sweetest thing anyone's ever offered to do for me," she whispers. She's never had anyone walk her into her first day of anything. "But I'll be fine, and you have your appointment to get to. I'll see you in, like, an hour?"

"Right, an hour," Regina says, exhaling slowly, and Emma squeezes her hand.

"Do you want me to walk you to Hopper's office?" she asks.

Regina shakes her head. "No," she answers in a decisive tone that's tempered slightly by the apprehension in her eyes. "No, I'll be just fine."

"You will," Emma agrees. "And then you can come laugh at me while I'm eyeballs deep in paperwork."

"Poor thing," teases Regina. "I might have to order you pizza for lunch."

"If you can't find me, I'll probably be crying in the bathroom from having to decipher Jones's files."

Regina laughs loudly, and Emma walks into the building with a huge grin on her face.

"Swan!" Jones exclaims as soon as she enters the squad room. "Thank god!" He and Humbert immediately engulf her in a hug. Nolan lags behind – he seems a bit mopey despite obviously being happy to see her.

"Welcome back, Detective Swan," Locksley says warmly. "Once you've made yourself at home, may I see you in my office for a moment?"

Emma nods and looks around. Nothing looks different except for the stack of files on her desk that certainly wasn't there before. She sighs. This will build character, if nothing else, and provided Regina doesn't intentionally reinjure her again, her physical therapist has expressed cautious optimism about her recovery being faster than usual. She'll be back in the saddle in no time.

After a few more minutes of joking with the guys and letting them catch her up on what she missed – something about a baby with missing or dead parents that she's sure Regina mentioned while she was distracted by other things – she knocks lightly on the door of Locksley's office.

"Have a seat," he offers. She obeys immediately. She doesn't have the same kind of relationship with Locksley that Regina does – nice as he is, he still terrifies her.

Or at least his power over her future does.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Sir? That's formal. I just wanted to check in on your recovery process. How's the shoulder."

"It's doing pretty well. I'm apparently healing 'shockingly' fast, according to my orthopedic surgeon. I just have to get my strength back up...sir."

He smiles. "That's great news. So, as I'm sure you know, you'll be riding a desk until your doctor clears you, helping with the endless mountain of paperwork. I'm fairly confident you know what you're doing, but if you have any problems, ask me or Mills. Maybe Nolan. I don't trust the others."

Emma chuckles nervously. "Will do. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, actually, there is," he replies slowly, the smile fading slightly from his face. "You're probably already aware of the fact that Regina spoke to me about your relationship."

"Yeah, she mentioned that," Emma mumbles. "Is that...she said you were okay with it. Obviously, we'll be discreet and professional and all of that. We're not going to, like-"

"I have no doubt of your professionalism," he interrupts. "Or hers. You don't need to worry about anything from my end, as far as your job is concerned."

"But?" she prompts, sensing there's more.

Locksley sighs. "There's no easy way to say this. Regina is one of my closest friends, and – well, to say she's been through a lot would be the understatement of the century. I know she can take care of herself, and I

respect that, but I just want you to know that if you do anything to hurt her, your job will be the last thing you should be concerned about. Do I make myself clear?"

Emma gulps. "Yes, sir."

"Good," he says seriously before breaking into a grin again. "It's good to have you back, Swan. Your presence around here was missed."

Absolutely terrifying, Emma thinks as she forces herself to smile back at him.

xx

Regina shows up at Dr. Hopper's door with her tail between her legs.

Figuratively speaking, of course.

She's greeted by someone whose tail is high in the air and wagging excitedly.

"Pongo's here," Archie says in apology. "He was feeling a bit under the weather this morning, so I brought him into the office, but now he seems to be in much higher spirits. If you don't want-"

"No, no, he's fine." Regina feels a smile tugging at her lips as Pongo licks her hand. "I'm glad to see him."

Archie grins. "He's excited to see you, too. Come sit down. It's been a week since I last saw you – how've you been?"

A week? Regina thinks, aghast. *Has it really been only a week?*

"I heard today was Detective Swan's first day back; you must be happy about that."

She just stares bewilderedly at him. So much has happened in a week.

"You mentioned at our last appointment that you...you know what? How about you just tell me what's going on? You seem to have a lot on your mind."

Where to even begin?

"At our last visit," she begins shakily, stroking Pongo's head for comfort, "you – I – I'm sorry for walking out on you."

"It's alright," Hopper immediately replies. "I overstepped my bounds. I should never have suggested-"

"But you were right," Regina interrupts. "I – I did end up addressing my feelings for Emma. Maybe not in the best way possible, but...well, anyway, we're now dating."

To say Archie looks shocked would be an understatement. It's the first time Regina's ever seen him completely at a loss for words, and she thinks about congratulating herself before remembering that she still has a very important problem to talk to him about.

"That – Regina, that's great," he finally manages to choke out, but a quick glance at her expression stalls him again. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," she replies. "I think so, at least. I'm not – I'm not completely certain that it will work out in the long run; there are a lot of...issues. Yes, issues. We still have a number of issues to work through."

He nods and cautiously ventures, "But it sounds like you think the relationship is worth the issues?"

"I do."

Pongo chooses that moment to clamber onto the couch and rest his face on her lap, causing both Regina and Archie to chuckle slightly in relief.

"Do you think you'd like to talk to me about any of those issues?" Archie asks after giving her a moment to scratch the Dalmatian behind the ears.

She looks down, embarrassed.

"Everything you say here is confidential," he reminds her for probably the thousandth time. "Even if I end up seeing Detective Swan as a patient at some point, I'll never divulge my knowledge of your relationship or anything else you say."

"That's not what I'm worried about."

"It's not?"

"No, she...she knows about the issues. I –" she takes a deep breath and blurts out "- I had another flashback."

Archie's eyes instantly grow concerned. "Oh?"

"On...Friday night."

"Are you okay? Would you like to talk about it?"

She shakes her head. "I'm mostly over it. It was...well, it was strange, because it wasn't about the event itself. It was about...well, the main problem is that it happened because she touched my scar."

He seems unsurprised by that, at least. "That's understandable. Has it happened before?"

"I don't remember. I – I'm sure in the early days, it happened once or twice, but actually, no one has touched it since it healed. Hardly anyone has even seen it. I – well, I suppose that's one trigger I was fairly successful at avoiding entirely."

"I see," Archie replies thoughtfully. "And do you think you can continue avoiding it if you're in a relationship?"

Regina stares at him like he's grown two heads. Didn't he need some kind of advanced degree to get this job? "Of course not. I want you to help me desensitize myself."

"So, you want her to touch it?"

"No, I don't want her to touch it, but I want to avoid having a flashback if it ever happens inadvertently. I need to be able to let her touch it if I want to have sex with her."

"And that's what you want? To have sex with her?"

Poor Archie. He probably thought he'd be able to avoid these conversations working for the police force. He'd never anticipated Regina Mills.

But that doesn't do a whole lot to increase her patience.

"Of course I want to have sex with her," she snaps. "Would we be having this conversation otherwise?"

"I suppose we wouldn't," he concedes.

"So, what should I do?"

Archie sighs and rubs a hand on his bald spot. "Well," he says slowly, "if you want to be able to let her touch it, you have to let her touch it. I mean, it's the same as desensitization to anything else. I'd advise starting in a fairly neutral situation, when you're both calm – probably *not* while you're in the midst of having sex." Regina smiles wryly. "And just...make sure you're open with her, and make sure she's supportive. It sounds as though she is."

"She is," Regina immediately agrees. "She's...she's incredible. She's more amazing than I could have ever imagined a person to be."

"Then I'm happy for you, truly happy. I'm not going to lie, Regina: like every other road you've faced, this one is going to be long and hard. But it sounds like Emma is worth it."

"Emma is worth it," she repeats, the warmth in her heart spreading throughout her body, all the way down to her toes and up to her face where it paints a smile across her lips. It's the kind of warmth that makes her feel like she has the strength to fight a thousand armies, to take on entire worlds.

It's love, and it terrifies and calms her all at the very same time.

xx

"DNA tests are in," Emma says eagerly as soon as Regina's back from her meeting with Hopper. "One of the potential victims was former US Military, so Whale was able to find him in the database: Philip Arendt. Driver's license is on file, along with a marriage license to some lady named Aurora. We've got his address."

"You ready?" Nolan asks, spinning a keychain around his finger.

"Yes, but I'll drive," snaps Regina. "You can't keep your mind off your unrequited love for long enough to focus on the road."

He replies with an angry huff and Emma cackles from her desk.

They drive in silence to the address on the man's license: it's fairly close to the park where they found the baby, lending validity to their theory that they may be connected.

"Nice place," Nolan remarks when they pull up in front of the building.

"Yes, well, everything looks nicer with plants in the windows," Regina points out with a slight roll of her eyes, but she has to concede that the townhouse is of a much higher quality than what she'd normally expect young couple to be able to afford in Boston. Perhaps they came from old money – not that it really matters, not if they're dead.

"Philip and Aurora Arendt? Boston Police!" he yells, knocking at the door. "Anybody home?"

No one answers.

"We need a warrant," Regina sighs. "Can you – no, actually, I'll call Blanchard."

Nolan flashes her a tight smile as she starts dialing, and Regina shakes her head at the thought that she's suddenly become the paragon of emotional stability when it comes to their ADA.

"Door's unlocked," Nolan remarks when Regina finally finishes barking orders at Mary Margaret and the frightened woman promises to contact Judge Gold immediately. "Wouldn't hurt to poke our heads in and make sure they didn't just miss our knock, right?"

Regina scowls but nods her assent, following him with her gun tightly in hand as he tentatively cracks the door open and slips into the entryway. "Hello?" she calls.

Nolan glances around the corner into the living room and states, "It's clear. Wherever our perp took them, it's not here."

Lowering her weapon, Regina rounds the corner and takes a look. The living room is clean but obviously lived in, with dolls and children's books on the sofa and coffee table. Several Disney DVDs are piled on top of the TV. It's obviously the home of a couple with a young daughter, and she gets a sinking feeling in her gut at the confirmation that at least one of that abandoned little girl's parents is most likely dead.

"Regina, come here!" David suddenly calls from the opposite side of the room. He's standing in front of the fireplace, staring at a photograph on the mantle. "Look at this."

Regina looks. It seems like a pretty standard family picture: a man, a woman (they must be Philip and Aurora – they look fairly similar to the driver's license photos on file), two daughters...

Two?

"Where's the other one?" she demands, voice catching in her throat.

David sighs and shakes his head, muttering, "Shit."

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> Oh, man. So, so sorry for the long wait on this one. Life happened. Thank you so much for your patience and continued support. I'll try to make sure the time between updates isn't quite so long in the future, and I hope this new installment was worth the wait. I took some liberties with certain relationships between characters. Hopefully, since this is a OUAT fanfic, you're all on board with that.
>
> Warning: There will be murder and blood in this chapter, and there are vague references to sexual assault in the flashback scene if you squint.

"Neighbors say the Arendts had two daughters: Anna, the eight-month-old from the park, and Elsa, who's three," Nolan reports breathlessly as he and Regina practically run back into the squad room.

"Yup – got their birth certificates here," Emma confirms in a hurry, barely looking up from her computer screen. "Three years, two months. Both born at Mass General. I'm working on Missing Persons Reports for all three of them. We've only confirmed for sure that the father was seriously injured, but the other blood type at the scene might've come from the mother or daughter. According to the drivers' licenses, Aurora's five-seven with brown hair and green eyes, and Philip –"

"We don't need their licenses for *that*," snaps Regina. "We saw the photographs at the house."

Emma looks slightly wounded, and Regina is struck with a brief pang of remorse, but she quickly shifts her focus back to more important matters.

"We don't have enough information on the disappearance to issue an Amber Alert," Locksley states, "but I've sent the pictures you texted me to all of the local news stations. I have an interview with Channel 7 in forty-five minutes. We already have the parents' information, so anything you've got on the daughter..."

Regina shrugs, feeling completely helpless. "Elsa Arendt, age three, daughter of Aurora and Philip. Blonde hair, blue eyes. She attends...Oceanview Preschool," she recites, anxiously tugging at her ring on its newly repaired chain. "She enjoys coloring, playing with princess dolls, building snowmen – everything a normal three year old likes. Beyond that, we've got nothing."

"They don't have any other family that we can locate," Humbert sighs. "Both Aurora and Philip's parents are deceased, and there aren't any siblings that we know of."

"Okay," Locksley says with a nod. "Humbert and Jones, I want you interviewing everyone from their workplaces and the daughter's preschool. Swan, Booth – keep calling every hospital, church, or daycare within a mile radius of the park. Fax them Elsa's description and photograph, as well, now that we have it. I've got Blanchard getting

subpoenas for their phone records and bank statements, so pretty soon I'll need you going over that with a fine-toothed comb. Mills and Nolan, I want the two of you back at the crime scene. Go over it with the crime scene techs – look for anything we might have missed the first time. I've got every available unit searching for this girl." He runs his fingers exhaustedly through his hair and adds under his breath. "Hopefully, she's still alive."

Nolan scowls and exclaims, "None of this makes any sense! If the parents are dead, why not just leave the bodies? Why take one kid and leave the other? What's the motive here?"

"Maybe the kids weren't supposed to be there," Booth muses, barely looking up from his desk. "If the killer was after the parents, didn't want to leave witnesses..."

"But then why leave-" suddenly, Nolan falls silent and sits down with a heavy thud.

"Eight-month-old can't talk," Emma says darkly – unnecessarily, in Regina's opinion, since even the dumbest among them had already come to the same conclusion. "The three-year-old, well, I mean, if they don't want witnesses –"

She angrily interrupts, "Yes, we know, Detective Swan," before the younger woman can continue. "We are all aware of what's at stake here."

"Alright!" Locksley cuts in. "Let's stop speculating and start searching. I'm assuming she's alive until proven otherwise, and if it's true, then time is of the essence."

Regina doesn't even wait until he's finished talking – she's already on her way out the door and Nolan is just a step behind her when, mid-stride, she nearly collides with a teary Officer Fa.

"I heard Philip and Aurora Arendt were our victims from the park," she sniffs. "Please tell me the news isn't true."

Regina and Locksley exchange troubled glances, and the lieutenant quickly turns to Swan and asks, "You can handle looking through bank statements on your own, right?"

She nods and, as if to illustrate her point, picks up the stack of Missing Child posters she's just made and carries them over to the fax machine.

"Okay – Booth, go with Nolan. Mills, I want you to take Officer Fa to Interview Room Two."

He watches, concerned, as Regina leads the distraught officer by her elbow down the hallway.

"You know them?" she asks gently.

xx

"Philip and I served together in the army," Mulan is explaining. "In Afghanistan, before I joined the force. When we finished our tours, he took some time off to get married and have kids, but he was planning to go back."

"What was he doing in the meantime? Did he have a job? Was he involved in any kind of organization?"

"He worked part time as a security guard. Aurora's a nurse, so they pretty much traded off who was at work and who was watching the kids. They've always been great parents – so great they never really had time for much else. We used to be pretty close, but I've barely seen them since Elsa was born, and I'd never even met Anna," she murmurs, choking back a sob. "They're dead, aren't they?"

"We don't know anything for certain," Regina says carefully, "but you saw the crime scene."

"And Elsa?"

"We're looking for her, for all of them. We – we'd like to be hopeful, but...well, we just don't know."

Officer Fa nods. "She's probably terrified, if she's still alive," she mutters.

"Do you know anyone else connected with them?" Regina asks. "Old army buddies, or anyone else who they may have had more recent contact with? Anyone who may have wanted to hurt them?"

The young officer looks troubled. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to hurt them. They're some of the nicest people I've ever met – they've always gotten along with pretty much everyone." She swallows hard before adding, "I know – well, the only thing I can think of is that Aurora had some kind of falling out with her godmother shortly before Elsa was born, but..."

She trails off, and Regina nods encouragingly. "Go on," she urges. "We have no leads right now. Anything could help."

Fa shakes her head. "I don't know much about it, just that it had something to do with Aurora's father's will. It wasn't – I don't *think* it was anything that would have led to that much blood." A queasy expression crosses her face, and she mutters, "I hope not, anyway."

"Okay," Regina says slowly. "This is all helpful. Do you know the godmother's name?"

"Her last name is Black. Her first name...I can't remember. I'm sorry." Her eyes fill with tears again and Regina can hear her breathing becoming shallower.

"It's okay, just take your time."

"It started with M?" Mulan offers desperately. "Mallory? Melanie?"

Regina notes it down and says, "Thank you," with as much warmth as she can muster. "Is there any other information you can tell us about her? Or the Arendts?"

"Just that they're really great people. If anything happened to them – or Elsa..." She reaches out to clutch Regina's hand and whispers, "You'll keep me in the loop?"

"I'll do one better. You're off duty now, right?" Regina asks sympathetically, feeling her heart go out to the young woman. The only feeling, in her opinion, worse than knowing that someone you care about is dead, is not knowing.

"That's right."

"Would you like to help us with the investigation? I'm sure Detective Swan would welcome your assistance."

Gratefully, Mulan flashes Regina a look that's perhaps meant to be a smile but comes out looking more like she's about to start sobbing. "I can do that," she agrees, voice soft but determined.

xx

"Nothing on here seems too out of the ordinary," Regina remarks, casting a critical eye over the reports from Philip Arendt's cell phone. Aside from the occasional take-out order, the man seems to have only ever called his wife, his employer, and his daughter's preschool.

"Malinda Black!" Emma suddenly shouts in triumph. "Aurora apparently called her last week. She lives in Chestnut Hill. Look familiar?" she asks Officer Fa, who had been poring over bank statements at Nolan's desk before coming over to see what the fuss was about.

"I've only met her once," she replies hesitantly. "But that looks about right. What's next."

"We bring her in and talk to her," Regina states, rising decisively from her chair. "We see what she knows and determine if she's a suspect."

"Call me if you figure out any places to look for the daughter," Blanchard says. "I've got Gold on speed-dial today. He's rushing all the warrants."

Regina flashes her a tight-lipped smile.

"Malinda Black," Emma muses, mostly to herself. "You really can't trust anyone whose last name is a color, can you? It's like in Clue." Then she realizes exactly what she just said (and who she'd said it to) and abruptly claps a hand over her mouth.

Idiot, she curses herself, peering anxiously over her computer screen. Regina's jaw is jutted out defiantly, but she doesn't show any further reaction. It's Blanchard, surprisingly, whose face pales considerably, and a tiny shiver runs down her spine before she regains composure and re-adopts her usual tranquil expression.

"I'm sorry; that was wildly insensitive," Emma mutters, staring down at her lap.

Regina sighs. "I suppose you're allowed one wildly insensitive comment. I wasn't exactly kind to you this morning."

"I don't think that's really how it works," Emma says guiltily. Regina's few sharp remarks may have hurt her feelings for a second, but they've been long forgotten now. They're all on edge because of the case, anyway. And none of it warrants casually reminding someone of the most traumatic event of their lives.

"It's fine," Regina says shortly. "Now, we have this woman's address. I'd say she's as good a suspect as any. Let's find her."

"Okay," Emma exclaims, jumping up from her seat. "Let's do this."

"No! You – you stay," orders Regina. "You're not cleared."

Emma rolls her eyes. "You need back-up."

"Not from you. Officer Fa?"

"She's off duty," Emma growls, shooting the young woman a dirty look when she immediately straightens and adjusts her badge at Regina's acknowledgement. "And she's not even a –"

"You're *not* going. I'll get Locksley to make the call if you won't listen to me."

"Fine! Get Locksley!"

Regina scowls at her, and Emma knows she's acting like a bratty kid throwing a tantrum, but she can't quite help herself. Sitting on the sidelines is much harder than she'd anticipated, and all the stress seemed to have rendered mature adult behavior slightly beyond her capabilities.

"Robin!" Regina calls, causing the harried-looking lieutenant to poke his head out his office door, phone still pressed against his ear. "We've got a potential suspect – victim's godmother – going to question her now."

"Great," Locksley mouths with his hand cupped over the receiver. "Take Fa."

The look on Regina's face could almost be described as victorious. "It seems as though you're back on duty," she tells Mulan. "Get your weapon and do exactly as I tell you."

The pair quickly exit the squad room, and ADA Blanchard pats Emma sympathetically on the shoulder. "It can't be easy," she murmurs.

"It's fine," Emma replies. Good lord, she's pouting. Regina was right: she and Henry actually are the same age. "It's just," she tries to explain, "Regina and I used to talk to suspects together."

Okay, no, that made it worse.

"*I'm* her partner," she tries again.

She can't tell if the look on Blanchard's face is pity or amusement. Probably some combination of the two.

"I don't think Officer Fa is replacing you," she offers. "Just, you know, until you're healthy, you can't be-"

"I know, Mary Margaret! I know!" Emma angrily interrupts. "That doesn't make it any easier when she acts all fucking high and mighty about it!"

Mary Margaret nods. "It would kill her, though," she says quietly, "to lose you. And if pissing you off can help..."

"Yeah, yeah, small price to pay. I know."

Emma sighs, once again feeling horribly guilty, and now irrationally irritated at the ADA for making her that way.

What's happening to her?

"How's the Glass case going?" she inquires, to distract both of them.

"Closing statements are tomorrow. I'd be surprised if we lose. Linda Billings – the widow – testified against him, and he's still too much of a lovesick fool to turn on her, so...the whole case is pretty much a done deal."

"He practically put himself away," Emma marvels. "And for *what*? A woman who's not even loyal?"

"Love can make us do crazy things," says a distant-eyed Mary Margaret. "And I suppose sometimes we can't help who we love."

Emma laughs in agreement. "Most of the time. Like, maybe ninety-eight percent. I'm starting to think that's not always such a bad thing, though." At least she feels pretty lucky in love right now, for the first time ever.

"Not always, but sometimes it can be pretty painful."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Emma asks, guessing that the ADA has *something* going on that led her to this topic.

Mary Margaret shudders. "Nope. Let's get back to this case."

xx

"So, what do you know about this woman?" Regina asks as they pull up to the address listed on Malinda Black's driver's license.

Officer Fa shrugs. "Not a whole lot. I met her once: she's pretty strange, but she seemed nice overall. Not like someone who might be a murderer. She and Aurora used to be really close until...well, until they weren't."

"Because of the will?"

"Right. I don't know all of the particulars, but Malinda basically raised Aurora. I mean, her mother died when she was really young, and her father was basically always away on business. I think she might have assumed that he'd remember her in his will, but..."

"He didn't?" Regina guesses.

"Apparently not."

"And Aurora?"

"Aurora was pregnant with her first child," Mulan explains, almost bitterly. "She didn't have time to think about anything or anyone else. I guess Malinda took offense."

There's something there, in the depths of Mulan's gaze. Some kind of hard edge – an old hurt, perhaps? Not that any of it is really her place to ask about, but still...Regina feels the curiosity gnawing at her.

It's none of her business, she reminds herself. Anyway, they're here, and the front door, strangely enough, is cracked open. Her focus can't be anywhere but here and now.

"Hello?" Regina calls, one hand resting atop the gun on her hip as she tentatively approaches the door. "Malinda Black? It's the Boston Police."

No response.

Officer Fa quickly pokes her head in the door. "Front hall's empty," she reports before suddenly flinching as she draws in a breath through her nose. "But the *smell* – oh god!" Regina feels her own face contort as she catches a whiff of the same stench – the unmistakable odor of a decomposing corpse.

Both women draw their weapons and enter the house, each crossing to opposite sides of the hall. Fa takes a peek into the kitchen and shakes her head. Regina cranes her neck around the door into the living room, and it takes all her years of training to stop her from jumping back in shock at the sight awaiting her.

It's definitely Malinda Black – or at least the resemblance is close enough, besides all of the blood – and she's very, very dead.

"Radio it in," she orders Fa, "and then we'll check the rest of the house."

It's empty, and they both end up back in the living room to secure the scene, waiting for the back-up officers and crime scene techs who are apparently four minutes out.

"I wonder if we're looking for the same killer," Mulan muses.

"It must be." Regina quickly takes note of the state of the body before averting her eyes – she's no Nolan, but she does feel slightly nauseated looking at victims whose throats have been slit. "Fits the M.O.," she observes. "Similar blood spatter patterns. Looks like both carotids have been severed."

Mulan nods and takes another look, appearing a tiny bit queasy herself. "Not really any sign of a struggle. Why would they leave this body and

one kid and take the others? Who is this killer?"

Regina barely suppresses a shudder as she forces herself to look anywhere in the room but the victim's neck. "Your guess is as good as mine," she says with a groan. There was very little that could have made this case – this *week,* and it's only Monday – any worse, and this is it.

The decorations on the wall are fairly sparse and mostly limited to paintings of animals, but there's one newspaper article that catches her eye, and she carefully steps over the blood surrounding the body to get closer to it.

Pictured: Malinda Black and Eva Blanchard at the opening of the Stoneham Avian Sanctuary, the caption states.

It's dated 1999 and probably means nothing, but all the same, Regina is pretty sure she feels the room start spinning around her as her shaking fingers pick up her phone and start dialing almost on autopilot. "Locksley!" she barks, "You need to get over here, now."

xx

"So what?"

"What do you mean, so what?" Regina demands angrily.

"I meant what I said. So what? Malinda Black worked for the Audubon Society, and Eva Blanchard, as you know, was a famous animal rights activist. According to this article, they worked together on the avian sanctuary back in ninety-nine. A lot of people were involved with that project."

"Malinda Black's throat was slit."

"Yes, it was," Locksley agrees, exhaling tiredly through his nose.

"Leopold White's M.O." Until Regina, anyway – but that was personal.

"Along with numerous other killers we've dealt with over the years. He's in jail, anyway."

"He could have trained someone – made a connection on the inside. You're telling me you honestly think this is just a coincidence? This woman was killed in the same way as White's victims, and she's got a picture of Eva Blanchard on her wall, who was White's –"

"One night stand from the late eighties?"

"The mother of his child," Regina hisses. "I knew him, Robin! She meant something to him."

"She died only about a year or two after that photo was taken. I don't think -"

"You're telling me you honestly expect me to believe this case has absolutely no connection to White?" Her voice is rising, and she knows she sounds hysterical, but at this point, there's nothing she can do about it. Locksley glances furtively around the room like he's wondering whether he has to start damage control.

"I don't *expect* you to believe anything," he says carefully. "We're certainly going to investigate every possible angle of this case. But a lot of people knew Eva Blanchard, either personally or through her work, and a lot of people have had their throats slit, and most of them don't overlap. Eva died fourteen years ago, and White's been in jail for the last eleven. I just...I don't want you to start panicking and jumping to conclusions."

"Too late for that," Regina mutters, though there is a small part of her that's always been soothed by Locksley's unwavering rationality.

"Someone should tell Mary Margaret," she suddenly realizes.

He stares at her, dumbfounded. "Yes, hello, ADA Blanchard, just wanted to let you know that our victim had a photo of your long dead mother in her living room. How, exactly, were you planning to start that conversation?"

"It's the right thing to do," Regina insists. "She would want to know."

"The *right* thing to do would be waiting until we have a lead before unnecessarily shaking her up," Robin counters. "But you know Blanchard far better than I do, so I'll leave it up to your judgment."

"She would want to know," Regina repeats firmly, but deep down, she has to admit that she's not sure. She's not entirely sure of anything except the dark pit of dread growing in her stomach and the fact that she won't be sleeping tonight.

xx

Glancing quickly down at her watch (It's five past. He's late – he's never late.), Regina adjusts her sunglasses and tries to keep a straight face as she takes a sip of the disgusting caramel latte that this alternate identity of hers apparently likes to drink.

No: that she *likes to drink.*

She's no longer Regina Mills, Wellesley-educated police detective. She is now Gina Miliota (she supposes she can pass for Italian, not that Leopold White is really observant enough to notice things like ethnicity), a bartender hailing from Long Island who enjoys drinking overly-sugary beverages and wearing see-through leopard print shirts that leave little about her assets to the imagination. She's everything she hates but apparently everything Leopold White evidently looks for in a love interest. Actually, she's fairly certain she had him at "assets."

It's working, though, and that's all that matters. Or at least that's what she tells herself, suppressing a shudder as she thinks about all the things she's had to do for this case that she doesn't recall ever seeing in her job description. She's getting closer and closer, and eventually they'll crack this case and she'll never have to see or speak to or be touched by Leopold White ever again. And maybe her next assignment won't be something so far beneath her dignity.

She hears the beep of a car horn and the squealing of tires and it's him, in the red Mustang convertible she's supposed to fawn over. She forces herself not to awkwardly adjust her miniskirt as she stands up – no skirt is too short for Gina Miliota – and raises her eyebrows at the sight awaiting her. Why the hell is there a teenage girl in the backseat?

Well, she supposes she'll soon find out.

A kiss, a raspy "Hey, baby," and a feigned smile later (although she's not sure he'd notice if she ever didn't smile – it's not as if he's looking above her neckline), he explains, "Gina, this is my daughter, Mary Margaret."

He has a daughter?

Named Mary Margaret? What the hell?

"I just met her yesterday."

Okay, maybe that's a bit more believable.

Her mind is spinning. A daughter? This changes things. Her first thought is that the girl could completely sabotage her investigation – is she going to have to interact with her? Will she be more observant than her father? Could this blow her cover? Her second, thought, however, is about what will happen to Mary Margaret when they eventually succeed in putting her father behind bars.

"Her mother left me without ever mentioning she was pregnant, but she recently died, and..."

His voice trails off, and he actually seems genuinely sad, which is perhaps the most surprising thing about the entire situation. She's

seen him express anger and carnal lust before, but never any kind of delicate human emotion like affection or sadness.

"She's beautiful, just like my Eva," he says somewhat wistfully. "And I'm going to make sure she's treated like a princess."

Your Eva? Regina thinks irritably. You can't claim a woman as your possession. Especially not so many years – Mary Margaret looks about fourteen – after dating her. Not ever.

No, she can't think like that. Gina Milioti was not raised on both first and second wave feminism. She'd probably think it was romantic to have a man acting like he owned her.

"How tragic," she simpers.

"Hi," says Mary Margaret, who had been silent up until then. She's smiling sadly and sounds even younger than she looks.

She's so sweet and innocent. She couldn't possibly have come from the creep who's currently reaching over to cup his hands over Regina's breasts even though they're in an open-roofed convertible next to a crowded sidewalk. She wonders if Mary Margaret has any idea who her father truly is. She wonders if there's any way she can scoop her up and get her out of here before the knowledge shatters her entire world.

Or something even worse happens.

"The girl is not your assignment!" Midas scolds her. "Do not let your feelings get in the way of the investigation." Then he mutters something under his breath about women that she so desperately wants to snap back at, but she doesn't. Women throughout BPD are watching her, younger female cops are dreaming of joining the homicide unit – she can't screw it up for them by losing her job for disrespecting her commanding officer.

She needs to keep her head down and follow orders now so that someday things will be better.

Still, she finds herself spending quite a bit of time with the young girl over the next few weeks, mostly at Leopold's bidding. "Gina, Mary Margaret needs decorations for her new room. You're a woman, you know what looks better."

"Gina, take my credit card and get Mary Margaret some new clothes. Whatever she wants is fine – anything for my princess."

Despite being almost irritatingly pure and naïve, Mary Margaret slowly manages to worm her way into the detective's heart.

"My father has been so nice to me," she observes curiously one day while they're picking out curtains.

"Well, he's your father, dear. He's supposed to be."

"Yes, but, it just feels strange. I wonder why I never knew him before. He says that he loved my mother, but she never even mentioned him. How can that be?"

"Love is complicated," Regina replies noncommittally. "Sometimes, it's unrequited."

"But then it's not really love, is it? In all the stories, love is felt equally by both people."

Regina shrugs. "True love, maybe."

Mary Margaret turns to her, eyes shining, and asks, "True love? Do you really believe in that?"

"Of course," she immediately exclaims, thinking of the love she shares with Daniel and how coming home to him the only thing keeping her going through this hopeless and humiliating case. "Love – true love – is magic. It creates happiness."

"Wow," Mary Margaret observes, wide-eyed at all the newfound knowledge she's drinking in. "Do you share true love with my father?"

Regina – who had allowed herself to forget for just a moment that she's supposed to be Gina Miliota – has to stop herself from laughing. "Too soon to tell," she finally chokes out. Mary Margaret seems to accept that response, moving on to the next set of curtains.

"My mother loved animals," she says abruptly.

"Did she?"

"Yes, she always said that all creatures deserve our love and respect, no matter how small." After a brief pause, she flashes a small smile up at Regina. "She was wonderful."

"You must really miss her," Regina observes. She's deduced, since their first meeting, that Mary Margaret's mother must have been Eva Blanchard, about whom she doesn't know much except that her own mother disliked running into the woman at social functions. Still, that doesn't say much, since her mother dislikes most people, and from what she can gather, Mary Margaret's mother was a good and upstanding woman who probably had incredibly valid reasons for never telling her daughter about her early-life escapades with Leopold White.

"I do," Mary Margaret sighs. "But she told me that as long as I hold goodness for all living things in my heart, she'll always be with me."

What a ridiculously maudlin thing to say, Regina thinks; yet she finds herself growing slightly teary because going from a mother who makes comments like that to a father who's most likely a serial killer is a transition she wouldn't wish on her worst enemy, let alone this sweet young girl who's never done anything to hurt anyone.

"What about you? Do you like animals?"

"I..." Gina Miliota most likely doesn't like animals (except maybe those tiny dogs who fit in purses), but it's Regina Mills who answers. "Yes, I love animals. Especially horses."

"Horses? Do you ride?"

"Yes; it's one of my favorite things in the world," she says quietly, leaning in like she's telling a secret. In a way, she supposes she is.

"I've always wanted to ride a horse," Mary Margaret says dreamily. "Is it exhilarating?"

One thing Regina will most certainly grant Eva Blanchard is that she gave her daughter a commendable vocabulary. "Yes, it is. It feels like

freedom."

"I hope I can try it one day – maybe with you?"

Mary Margaret's eyes are alight with hope and Regina feels a smile creeping onto her face. "I would like that," she answers with perfect honesty.

"Then maybe I'll get the curtains with horses on them," Mary Margaret says happily. "To remind us of our plans." She skips merrily over to the salesperson to ask for help with measurements, and Regina silently curses herself for breaking her own vow to never get emotionally involved in her cases.

xx

Emma's two sips into her fourth coffee of the night when Locksley returns to the squad room, rubbing blearily at his eyes. Blanchard's beside her, having chosen to come to the station to keep her company after finishing work instead of going home like she probably should. Regina and Nolan aren't far behind – the latter looks as if he might cry, and the former's face is completely blank. Emma would say she looked emotionless if there wasn't something dark and turbulent just under the surface of her eyes. Nolan collapses heavily into his chair, and even Regina sits without any of her usual grace, seemingly unaware of

anyone's eyes on her or anything besides the probably scary thoughts swirling around her mind.

"Booth and Humbert are still out with the patrol units," she reports to the lieutenant when he stares expectantly at her. "Jones was pursuing a potential lead in Dorchester, but apparently nothing came of it, so he's on his way back now. He said he tried to call you, but it went straight to voicemail or something."

Locksley sighs. "My battery died. I'm about to start charging it."

He trudges into his office and Emma turns to her fellow detectives, asking, "Anything?"

Both shake their heads.

"No bodies, no kid. Previous suspect's dead. Whoever did it could be halfway to Seattle by now, for all we know," Nolan mutters. "Locksley alerted the FBI, but...I don't know. It's hard to be optimistic."

Emma nods in understanding. "Okay," she sighs. "Well, Malinda Black had Aurora Arendt listed as her next of kin, so that's...a problem. But she has three sisters: Flora, Fauna, and Meriwether –"

"Who the hell names their kids shit like that?" demands Jones, striding into the room without so much as a hello. "It's like we need to give people a test before allowing them to have kids."

Emma bristles at the comment and snaps, "You're one to talk. Your parents named you *Killian*!"

"I'm Irish, and they were terrible parents. I stand by my remarks."

"Will you children please stop bickering?" Mary Margaret scolds.

"Sorry, Mom," Emma says sarcastically, but she gives Mary Margaret a friendly pat on the shoulder that she hopes makes up for it.

The ADA sighs. "We're all a little off today," she allows. Turning to Locksley, who's poked his head out of his office to see what all the fuss is about, she grabs her bag and says, "I left a stack of signed warrants and subpoenas on your desk. Call me or go straight to Gold if you need anything. I have to –"

"Mary Margaret, wait!" Regina suddenly exclaims as she rises from her seat like she's just gotten out of a trance. Locksley looks apprehensive.

Emma clears her throat and continues, "Anyway, I was able to contact Meriwether; she says she'll be here tomorrow to I.D. the body and

answer any questions." As she speaks, she keeps an eye on Mills and Blanchard speaking in hushed tones in the corner. "She has to drive up from Pennsylvania, so..."

She trails off, distracted, and Locksley just nods at her like he wasn't paying attention either. Regina and Mary Margaret should really have taken their conversation out of the room if they didn't want every single person on the squad listening in.

"So, you're sure you don't know her?" Regina asks, almost accusingly, holding a plastic evidence back containing some sort of photo within two inches of the ADA's face.

"Yes, Regina, I'm sure I don't know her," Mary Margaret exclaims. "Why would I know her?"

"Do you remember anything about your mother's work on the project?"

"No. I was, like, eleven, Regina. You know that. All I know is that it was a really big project and a lot of people worked on it, so I'm not sure why you think this has any –"

"Her throat was slit!" Regina says, much more loudly than she probably intended to. "And that's –"

"Today! Her throat was slit today. He's been in jail for over ten years, and I think one of us would know if he'd escaped!"

"He could have trained someone," argues Regina. "In prison. And sent him or her after this woman and a family that apparently meant a lot to her. If you know something, that could help us figure out the motive, and then maybe we can find this missing girl before something horrible happens to her, if it hasn't already."

"Good lord, do you have any idea how insane you sound right now?" Mary Margaret demands with a forced laugh. "You think that because this woman knew my mother, who died twelve years ago, that my father randomly decided to get someone from prison to murder her *now*? And attack a completely unconnected family because...why? For fun?"

"Don't ask me to decipher your father's psychology."

Mary Margaret makes a noise that sounds surprisingly close to a growl, and Emma is thoroughly surprised. "I thought we'd gotten over this," she says angrily.

"This isn't about getting over anything; this is about finding a suspect and saving a lost child before it's too late! Or do you think we're going to solve the case with rainbow kisses and unicorn stickers?"

"No, this is about you living in the past. What do you want to do, Regina? Do you want to go to Walpole and ask him? Do you really think

that will yield anything?"

"I don't know, but I'm not hearing you or anyone else come up with any better ideas. Instead, you're defending a man who murdered and –"

"Whoa!" Locksley finally exclaims, jumping in between the two women just as Mary Margaret is starting to clench her fists. Regina's face is beet red, and she's breathing heavily. "*This* is not going to solve anything. Both of you need to just –" he quickly glances at his watch and shakes his head "- go home. Mills, you're only supposed to be here six hours – it's been almost fourteen. Get out of here; get some air; get some sleep. Come back tomorrow morning ready to focus."

Blanchard quickly nods and flees the room, but Regina leans in close to Locksley's face, still seething, and turns the full force of her anger on him.

"So, now you're accusing me of not focusing on the case?"

Locksley sighs. "Regina, don't –"

"Don't what? Don't get angry because we don't have *any* leads on this case and yet everyone is still ignoring my theory? I should just...not get angry about that? Because there is a little girl out in the cold, with the person who murdered her parents, and we're just sitting around instead of pursuing a possible suspect!"

"Leopold White is not a possible suspect!" Locksley exclaims, causing all of the other detectives' eyebrows to jump up in astonishment as they start to put the pieces together. "Your theory is based on nothing, and I think if you got a little rest and perspective, you'd be able to see that for yourself."

Regina's lips quiver, and her voice shakes as she asks the lieutenant, "You're really not going to listen to me? You know that last time...last time you didn't listen..."

"Regina, I'm listening to you. I just...right now, I think you're letting your emotions get in the way of...of rationality, and I don't think that's going to help tonight."

"Right. My emotions."

"Regina..."

"No, I heard you loud and clear," she says coldly. "I'll just get out of here so all of you rational, sane people can get back to work without my *emotions* distracting you."

She storms out the door, and Locksley turns exhaustedly to face the rest of the squad. "Get back to work!" he barks, and the detectives immediately scramble to obey.

Suddenly, he calls, "Swan!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You've done more than enough for your first day back. I'll see you at seven tomorrow morning." He gestures out the door to Regina with his chin, lifting a hand to his ear and mouthing, "Call me," and Emma grabs her jacket and scurries after her partner without a word of protest.

She finds Regina in the parking garage, standing in front of the car door but staring blankly at it instead of getting in.

"You want me to drive?" she offers.

Regina's eyes are hazy, unfocused, but Emma's voice makes her snap to attention. "What? Did Locksley send you to keep an eye on me?"

"Something like that," Emma says lightly, not really seeing the point in lying.

"Do you think I'm insane, too?"

Maybe, Emma thinks privately. Aloud, she only says, "I think you're tired, and this case has everyone a little shaken up. I don't think the dead suspect today helped anyone, least of all, you."

Frustrated, Regina blows a burst of air out of her nose and says, "So you don't believe me? That White's involved?"

"The evidence is pretty much nonexistent," the rookie detective admits, bracing herself for a storm. Instead, Regina deflates, leaning against the car in utter exhaustion.

"I know," she says softly. "I know."

Emma offers her a small smile. "Let's go home?" she suggests. "I'll drive, and we'll – well, we probably won't sleep, but we can pretend for a while, and that'll have to be good enough."

xx

Regina huddles at one end of the couch, Henry's blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders. She's staring vacantly off into space like she has been for most of the evening, and Emma's not sure whether she should try to get her out of it or just let her be.

"Cold night," she observes, settling down next to the older woman, close but not touching yet.

Regina nods wordlessly.

A moment of uncomfortable silence later, she starts to offer, "Hey, I was thinking of making some cocoa, if that's something you-"

"Emma," Regina interrupts, like she hadn't even heard, "what's your earliest memory?"

Emma blinks once or twice before answering, "Umm...I think the first thing I remember clearly is going to a zoo and seeing otters. I'm pretty sure I was three?" Actually, she's absolutely certain she was three, because she remembers quite vividly that it was only one week later when her adoptive family informed her that they were having their own baby and sent her back.

That was a really shitty second memory for them to saddle her with, she thinks irritably. But at least her first one is pretty decent.

"Yes, mine is also from about age three," murmurs Regina. Her gaze is distant and troubled, and it immediately becomes obvious to Emma that she's thinking about their missing toddler.

Their missing toddler?

She's not exactly sure when she started feeling so possessive toward this lost little girl that she's never even met. Maybe it's that maternal instinct kicking in. Maybe it's just because she knows Elsa – assuming she's still alive (*Please, if there's a god, let her be alive*, she thinks desperately.) – is hurt and afraid and has absolutely no one.

Well, except her baby sister.

The fucking foster system had better keep them together.

Suddenly, leaping off the couch and violently throwing the blanket aside, Regina exclaims, "This is ridiculous! We should we out there searching for her!"

"Yeah, we should," agrees Emma, "but-"

"We don't need *breaks*," Regina spits as she angrily paces the floor. "We need to find her. I don't know how the hell Locksley thinks we're going to get any sleep tonight when we're nowhere near closing the case and there's a three year old who is most likely in grave danger!"

"He probably doesn't," Emma says reasonably, even as she thinks that perhaps it's not a good thing if *she's* the voice of reason in this operation. "But, you know..."

Her voice trails off as Regina fixes her with an angry glare, her hands and entire body trembling with a powerful combination of fear and rage that's – if Emma's being honest with herself – pretty fucking terrifying.

"Don't even say what I think you're going to say," she growls.

Emma sighs and holds her hands up in surrender. "I was just-"

"Save it, Emma. She's been missing for close to four days. The average survival time for abducted children is measured in *hours*. And because my emotional state is apparently so fragile that it's somehow a burden to have my help and I've been assigned a babysitter-"

Regina's voice, which had already been raw and growing hoarser by the second, finally cracks, and she breaks down in tears in the middle of Emma's living room.

"Regina," Emma begins helplessly, "I –"

"Don't, Emma. Just...don't."

It takes half a second of hesitation, but Emma quickly pushes herself off the sofa and crosses the room in two giant steps to pull a trembling Regina into her arms.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I know it sucks. I feel the same way, if that helps at all. We should be out there, finding her."

"And you're not, because of *me*."

"I –"

"Don't try to deny it. You know it's true."

"It is," Emma says carefully, still holding Regina close, "but I don't mind." Regina stares at her, completely disbelieving. "I mean, I mind that we haven't found her yet, and that I'm not helping, but I don't blame you."

Shaking her head in exasperation, Regina mutters, "I don't deserve you."

"You do, and we can argue about that later, but I don't know if love is really about what you deserve," Emma points out with a shrug before raising her eyebrows at the words coming out of her mouth. Did she just

say *love*? Regina has said it before, of course, but she hasn't. It's not really a word she makes a habit of using with anyone except Henry.

And now the way that Regina is staring at her has her on edge – the older woman's eyes are dark and inscrutable, and Emma wonders, for a moment, if she's overstepped and is about to be severely chastised for it. She prepares for the words, but instead, Regina roughly grabs her face and presses their lips together with such force that it's almost terrifying.

"Regina...what?" Emma gasps when they separate, but there's no answer since her partner's mouth has already moved elsewhere, sucking hungrily at a tender spot on Emma's neck.

"Regina," she moans, torn between pleasure and abject confusion, "what are you doing?"

"I want to forget, Emma," Regina whispers into the warm skin near the blonde's collarbone while her fingers make slow and shaky work of the buttons of her shirt. "Please, help me forget."

Forget what? Emma wonders.

"Um...okay?"

"I need...I need to make it stop."

"Make *what* stop?"

There's still no answer – Regina has now finished with Emma's shirt and is working in earnest at removing her own, and Emma's stomach lurches as she remembers the last time they tried to do this.

"Whoa – Regina, stop!" she exclaims. "Hold on. Let's...let's think this through for a minute."

Regina freezes and looks up from her buttons with wide, fearful eyes. "Think what through," she asks, suddenly timid.

"This!" Emma responds, gesturing wildly around at the whole situation. It's all wrong, she thinks desperately. "We – I thought we said we were going to – that we'd do this when we –"

"So you don't want..." Regina's voice trails off and, a moment later, finishes in a tear-filled rasp "...me?"

"What? No, I – what I *want* isn't really the issue here, it's –"

But Regina is no longer listening – she's already fleeing into the bathroom, and she slams the door shut forcefully behind her.

"Jesus," Emma mutters, tiredly tangling the fingers of one hand in her air while the other re-buttons her shirt, and she looks longingly at her front door before sighing and turning apprehensively toward the bathroom. That went about as poorly as it possibly could have. And now she somehow has to fix it.

xx

Regina leans heavily against Emma's sink, struggling to regain something – anything – resembling composure. It would likely hurt their still-new relationship if she were to break something in here. Maybe she can get away with it at Robin's, but...well, she has a feeling that she and Emma are on rocky ground already.

She lets her shirt fall open, inhales to the count of ten, and then exhales slowly as she casts a critical glance at herself in the bathroom mirror. For the moment, at least, she truly feels her age, and from the neck up, she looks it, too. There are dark circles under her eyes that not even the expensive makeup her mother gave her for her last birthday can hide, and wrinkles she's fairly certain weren't visible this morning. She may even be sprouting a gray hair or two. God, she needs sleep; she needs her mind to quite down for long enough that she can even *think* about sleep.

Below the neck, it's a little better. She'll be the first to admit she can no longer pass for a twenty year old, but she's taken good care of her skin over the years and her somewhat excessive exercise regime has left her fit and toned. She's not sure what about her body Emma could have found quite so repulsive, except...that.

It's peeking out just above the waistline of her pants, and she feels her breath start to pick up as she allows her eyes to travel down the length of the mirror from her face to her stomach. It takes every ounce of fight left in her to get it back under control, but she does, and then she unceremoniously yanks the button open and forces herself to take a long, hard look at it.

It's not just that it's ugly; it is – she always laughs when she hears women complain about their c-section scars making them undesirable, because they know *nothing* – but it's just dead skin tissue. The scar itself is harmless.

But it will always be an unpleasant reminder of the moment Leopold White had complete control over her.

A reminder that perhaps he still does.

"Regina?" Emma is calling from outside the door. "Let me in – please?"

She can't let him own her anymore. She can't live her life, can't find happiness, if she continues feeling this powerless and confined to the past. She needs to start making her own fucking destiny.

She opens the door to let Emma in.

The younger woman starts to explain, "Look, I didn't mean –" but Regina cuts her off.

"Touch it," she demands.

"What?"

"I want – I *need* you to touch it."

Emma blinks, and Regina can see in her face the exact moment when she finally processes the (admittedly, somewhat unclear) request.

"Right now?"

"Yes!" exclaims Regina, exasperated and now somewhat panicked that Emma doesn't seem to understand the urgency of the situation.

"You know you're a really great cop, right?" Emma asks solemnly. "Even with all the personal baggage. And I'll still love you even if we wait."

Okay, so maybe she does understand, but that doesn't change the situation.

"Please?" she begs.

Their eyes meet, and finally Emma takes a deep, shuddering breath, steps in closer to her, and whispers, "Okay."

Trembling, Regina squeezes her eyes shut and grabs tightly onto Emma's shoulders. "You're sure about this?" she confirms. Regina nods and holds her breath as she feels the warmth of Emma's hand drawing closer to her skin, every muscle in her abdomen tightening, bracing for the contact. It comes in the form of a feather-light touch that's barely there but still brings on a burst of sharp, searing pain. She knows it's just a ghost, knows it's all in her mind, and yet she still can't seem to force it away.

Emma's arms are around her now, pulling their bodies flush against each other as soothing hands make their way gently up and down her back.

"Emma," she breathes, voice catching in her throat as she leans in to bury her face in tangled blonde curls.

"I'm still here. Are you?"

She breathes in the smell of Emma's sweat and the vague remnants of whatever two-in-one shampoo she'd used that morning; it smells like peace.

"I'm still here," she replies with much greater strength and perhaps a bit of pride in her voice because, as small as it is, being "still here" may be her biggest accomplishment of the day. Ever so gently, she lets her grip on Emma's shoulders lessen and trails her hands down the younger woman's abdomen to eventually rest on her waist.

"It's just a scar," Emma says quietly. "The thing that it reminds you of...that's over now."

Regina snorts humorlessly at the thought. The mark on her upper lip from an unfortunate childhood incident involving a horse and a tree branch – that's "just a scar." This...it's more. No matter how many times she successfully lets Emma touch it, it will always be more.

"I wish I could believe that," she murmurs, sadly shaking her head. "But I just...I look at it and see my lowest moment. I see *him* and he's – it's – on my body. It's always right there to remind me of how weak I am."

As bitter, angry tears leak out of Regina's eyes and trail down her cheeks, Emma's hand reaches up to stroke her hair. "If it makes you feel any better," she says haltingly, like she's not sure how it'll go over, "that's not what I see when I look at it. Weakness, I mean."

Regina slowly lifts her head, eyes questioning.

Emma's face is dead serious. "I see strength, and courage, and loyalty, and everything that allowed you to survive and keep going when everyone would have understood if you hadn't. Seriously, Regina, you're fucking incredible, and that scar is proof of how much."

"I hate it," Regina insists, forcing a scowl to keep herself from completely breaking down. "And I fail to understand why you don't."

Emma simply shrugs. "It's just another part of you." And then, suddenly, she's loosening her arms and bending one knee, and –

"Emma, what are you doing?" Regina demands, panic once again starting to rise in her chest. This is certainly unanticipated, whatever it is.

"It's a part of you," Emma repeats as she kneels down on the linoleum, "and I love you." Reaching both hands up and intertwining her fingers

with Regina's, she leans in an presses a tender but surprisingly possessive kiss right in the center of the scar.

Regina can't keep down the gasp that escapes her throat, a gasp that turns into a thick sob somewhere in between her chest and her mouth, and her body trembles uncontrollably until Emma rises and pulls her close.

"I love you, too," she whispers through her tears.

Emma's lips meet hers, and Regina closes her eyes and lets her mind go for just a moment; she allows herself to revel in the sensation that in this entire universe, there is only Emma – only Emma and Regina and the pure love shining from both of them that lights the present, the future, and even the past with its warm glow of beauty and magic.

"I could hold you like this forever," she tells Emma.

"That sounds great, but how about holding me like this in a horizontal position on my bed for the next –" she cranes her neck around to check the clock on the wall "- four and a half hours until we're due back at the station?"

"That will have to do," Regina agrees. "And then," she adds with newfound conviction, "we're going to catch this killer, and we're going to find Elsa and bring her home."

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> Trigger Warning: Rape and mentions of child abuse/molestation in the flashback scene: not particularly graphic, but definitely there, so please avoid italicized portions if that's an issue. There are also a few vague mentions of past assault during the sexy times in the first section. They are meant to be healing in nature, but still, you might want to be aware if that's something you're particularly sensitive about. Also note that in the second to last and last sections, there will be discussion of hostage/captivity types of situations.

Emma stops them at the bedroom door, hands running lightly up and down Regina's bare sides, causing her skin to tingle even as it soothes her, and she melts into the gentle touch, her breath coming easy for once as Emma's love seems to seep in through her pores and fill her entire body with warmth.

"You're amazing," Emma murmurs. "Like, breathtakingly beautiful."

Regina can't stop the blush that creeps onto her cheeks. "And you're very kind."

"No," Emma corrects her with a kiss, "I'm honest."

"You're something."

The next kiss is more forceful, Emma pressing her against the doorframe as her tongue and hands explore greedily. Regina moans softly into Emma's mouth, and the blonde pulls their lips apart, shaking her head with an amused smirk.

"I want you," she says in a thick, husky whisper. "I...I want to just forget everything and like...*ravish* you right now."

"Ravish me?" Regina teases. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

"God, you know what I mean," Emma groans. "And why is it that I get so turned on even when you mock me?"

"Perhaps you have a problem with your self-esteem?" Regina guesses, rising on her toes to place an apologetic kiss on Emma's hairline. "But to your point, if you want me, then...here I am."

Emma's eyes pop wide open in surprise, and her hold on Regina's hips tightens. "Wait, really? Right now? Are...are you sure it's okay?"

Is she sure? No, she's not sure about anything, ever, except she's somehow convinced that with Emma, it doesn't matter. Because Emma's arms are holding her, their touch signifying a love that she's certain means strength, and even though she's exhausted and stressed and utterly terrified, this is the strongest she's ever felt, and if she doesn't capitalize on it, perhaps she'll never feel the ecstasy that she so desperately craves.

Regina gulps, and then forces a shaky nod. "I'm not sure," she admits, "but I know it's what I want."

"Then who am I to deny you what you want, my queen?" Emma says with mock bravado, feigning a bow that has Regina holding back a giggle. It feels unfamiliar yet so very comfortable in her throat. The next thing she knows, Emma is kissing her again, deeply and hungrily, and she's hurrying to divest herself of her remaining clothes.

"No rush," the younger woman rasps in between kisses. "It's not like we're going to get any sleep, anyway, so we have all night to make this happen."

Emma's getting excited, and Regina suddenly feels a cold, sinking dread in the pit of her stomach as she realizes that, scar issues aside, she and Emma still have wildly different experiences when it comes to sex, and as much as she wants it (Oh, how she wants it with ever fiber of her being!), there's no universe where this is possibly going to be easy for her. "Emma, I should probably let you know that it's been...well, it's been over eleven years since I last...successfully, anyway..."

Her voice trails off, and she watches Emma worriedly, wondering like always if she's admitted too much, if *this* will be the turn-off that finally sends her young lover running.

Emma just shrugs. "All the more reason to make it count, then," she points out.

"And," she adds, the growing lump in her throat making every word a struggle, "the last...encounter...it wasn't exactly...well, it was..."

"Unpleasant?" Emma guesses, saving her from having to say it, voice full of sympathy but thankfully, not pity.

"Unpleasant would be an understatement."

Emma nods, face solemn. "Okay," she finally says.

"Okay?"

"I mean, it'll be an experiment. Maybe...maybe we'll have some issues to work out along the way, but I guess that makes it the same as everything else in our relationship, right?"

"Right," Regina agrees, letting out a breath she wasn't fully aware she was holding in.

Emma tenderly kisses her jaw line, right under her ear, and whispers, "Before we start our little experiment, is there anything else I should know? Like, what not to do?"

Regina thinks, wishing bitterly that this conversation wasn't a necessary precursor to what *should* be a blissful and spontaneous experience. There are hot tears burning behind her eyes at the injustice of it, and finally she manages to reply, "You probably shouldn't touch my wrists."

"Seems reasonable," Emma says.

"And, perhaps also try to refrain from stabbing me," she tries to joke, attempting to keep the mood light, but the sound that escapes her throat to accompany the words is about as far from laughter as a sound can get, and Emma's arms instantly tighten around her, a hand rising to protectively caress the back of her neck.

"I think I can manage that, too."

Regina buries her face in Emma's shirt, feeling exposed and vulnerable as she stands there in her underwear and the tears she can't quite prevent leak out of her eyes.

"You're scared, aren't you?" the younger woman asks softly.

There's no point in denying it. "Terrified."

Emma nods. "Me too," she admits.

"Emma..."

"I don't want to hurt you. I mean, this is, like, kind of a lot of pressure."

"We don't have to –"

"No, just let me finish. I can't – I can't promise not to hurt you. We both know that. But, like...I haven't dealt with what you have, but I do know what it's like to have sex that isn't exactly...pleasant. I mean, I pretended to be straight for a while, and then I had a hard time figuring out what I wanted, and so on."

"Emma –"

"So here's what we're going to promise: we need to talk – about *everything*. I'm always going to ask you and whatever you're feeling, you tell me, okay? If you like it, you hate it, whatever. And I can't promise not to make any mistakes, but I promise I'll always listen when you tell me what you need. Is that cool?"

Regina bites back a sob of gratitude and says. "Yes. That's – it's very cool."

Grinning, Emma kisses her, nibbling lightly at her bottom lip while her hands migrate downward, finding Regina's breasts and rubbing them in slow circles. "Still cool?" she confirms.

"Still cool."

What follows is something Regina isn't sure she'd be able to articulate even with every word of every language at her disposal. The excess of sensation, the electrifying feeling of every single nerve in her body activating, is outmatched only by the complete calm and safety brought on by the sheer reverence with which Emma's hands, lips, and tongue explore every inch of her, leaving her at once thoroughly exposed and thoroughly protected.

It's certainly wordier than any sex she's ever experienced, with each movement preceded by "Is this okay?" and followed up with "How does this feel?" But after the initial *new*ness of it wears off (even Daniel, who'd always been so intent on pleasing her, was never particularly talkative about it), she finds that she likes it, the earnest expression on

Emma's face each time she checks to ensure that her touches are pleasurable warms her heart even as it continues to build the heat and pressure within her core.

She's putty in Emma's hands, but she's also completely in control, sexy and powerful even while she gives over the ownership of her body to a woman she's now convinced truly does have magic in her fingers (and her mouth).

Somewhere along the way, she manages to wrangle the younger woman out of her clothes as well, and now she smiles up at her, lacing their fingers together as Emma straddles her, hips grinding, as they slowly and rhythmically rub against each other.

She gently takes Emma's hands and places them along the sides of her abdomen.

"Touch it again," she orders.

"Are you sure?"

"I want you to."

Emma's hands run up and down her belly once more before her thumbs begin to trace along the jagged lines of the scar. "Is this okay?" she asks

dubiously.

"Yes," Regina rasps, unable to form words to describe the surge of ecstasy she feels within her at the ability to stay calm, to stay present, as Emma's soft, affirmative touch takes each of her weaknesses and slowly, lovingly, turns them to strength.

"You," Emma murmurs, leaning down to kiss Regina's neck, "are so fucking amazing." Another kiss. "You're so brave." Another. "And strong." One more, on her lips. "And gorgeous." A long, hard kiss on her collarbone that will probably leave a mark, but she doesn't care. "Every inch of you is beautiful," Emma declares, shifting downward to pepper Regina's breasts with dozens of feather-light kisses that create goose bumps on her skin. "And your heart...your soul..." The kisses make their way down her belly, stopping just above the scar. "You're the most amazing woman I've ever known, and don't you ever forget it."

She finishes the litany with a trail of tender kisses along the length of the scar, and Regina's breath hitches as she reaches up to massage Emma's shoulders, hoping her touch will communicate her love and gratitude in spite of the emotion overwhelming her vocal cords.

"So," Emma husks. "Is it cool with you if I move this down a little lower?"

Regina's heart begins to pound as the desire mounts between her legs. She nods, breathlessly.

"Nope." Emma shakes her head. "You gotta say it."

"Yes," Regina finally manages to choke. "Please?"

Emma grins and hoists Regina's legs over her shoulders. "This comfortable for you?"

"It's fine," Regina replies, looking skeptically at her partner even while she struggles to think straight. "But it can't be great for you."

"Don't worry about me," laughs Emma. "This is gonna be fucking amazing for me in a few minutes."

A shiver runs up Regina's spine as Emma grabs hold of her ass, fingers massaging firmly, and her mouth presses hard, greedy kisses on her inner thighs, sucking and gnawing at increasingly tender flesh as she gets closer and closer to the center.

"I'm gonna taste you now," Emma informs her, her breath hot and sticky against the pooling wetness as Regina's sex aches for release. "Is that okay?"

"Very," Regina somehow manages to sputter. A gasp of surprise escapes her list as Emma's tongue flicks quickly and lightly through her.

"Feel good?" she asks.

"Mmhmm" is all Regina can reply, her voice a high-pitched whimper, before Emma goes in again, this time licking long, slow circles around her clit, steadily increasing the pressure until Regina's entire body is trembling, her back arched high off the bed.

"More," she practically squeaks, and Emma lifts up her face for just a second, drawing in a big breath before starting a series of alternatingly hard and soft flicks that leave Regina grunting.

"That's hot," Emma mutters. "Loud is good. Let's wake my neighbors."

Regina feels herself shaking, hanging on the edge of release, unable (and now unwilling) to quiet the louder and louder moans that come out of her with every stroke of Emma's tongue. She feels the other woman start to pull back and, dismayed, she drives her hips forward, thighs squeezed around Emma's head, harder, demanding more pressure as she practically vibrates with desire, needing Emma's touch like oxygen.

"Is this –" Emma begins breathlessly, but Regina cuts her off.

"No, Detective Swan," she hisses. "No more 'Is this okay.' You do not speak again until you've finished what you started. Is that clear?"

Emma laughs. "Crystal," she confirms, before pushing Regina's thighs further apart and giving her clit a long, hard suck.

Regina feels her body lift on its own, as suffocating pressure finally gives way to soaring weightlessness, a deeply-anticipated release against the demons that have long held her down. Her body and soul rise as one, radiating freedom, and a garbled, unfamiliar noise forces its way out of her throat before she crashes back down, trembling and vulnerable.

And, embarrassingly, weeping.

"Oh shit," Emma breathes, immediately scrambling up the bed to lie beside her. "What did I do? Was that not okay?"

"No, it..." her tongue feels heavy in her mouth, her breath shallow as sobs she can't seem to control wrack her entire body. "It was perfect."

"Then why are you –"

"I don't know!" Regina exclaims angrily, hiding her face in her hands. What happened to controlling her body? What happened to feeling strong and confident? "I – I'm sorry."

Sobs turn to hiccups and embarrassment to shame as Emma, struggling to understand, tries to soothe her with gentle touches.

"It's okay," she murmurs. "Hey, look at me." Slowly, painfully, Regina looks. "Whatever you're feeling right now, it's okay."

Kneeling once again over Regina's body, she kisses a trail back up from her thighs to her belly to her breasts and neck and finally up to her lips. "I'm still here, and I still love you, and you're still beautiful and amazing."

Regina pulls Emma on top of her, fingers tangled tightly in disheveled blonde curls, and allows the warmth and pressure of Emma's skin against hers to help her heart rate gradually slow to a manageable level. Emma's hand lightly cups her cheek, her thumb brushing away a stray tear as she whispers, "You're my hero, always."

A strangled, quiet sob rises from her chest. "And you're mine," she replies, lips meeting Emma's in a kiss that she hopes says everything her words will never be able to. Then, with the sound of Emma's deep, steady breath in her ear, Regina allows her eyes to close as she drinks in the love and sweetness filling the air, and she eventually drifts off into a blissful and safe slumber.

It ends far too soon, but when they awaken in each other's arms, sticky with sweat and still exhausted but somehow glowing with contentment, Regina thinks that maybe it's enough.

xx

The squad room is full, even at barely seven in the morning. Everyone's eyelids are half-shut, heavy with exhaustion, but the room is abuzz with nervous energy as Regina and Emma walk in. Their arms are laden with coffee and donuts, and Regina is almost shocked when they're greeted with grateful smiles instead of the indifference and suspicion she'd become used to.

"You good?" Locksley asks quietly, humming with contentment as he takes a long swig of coffee. "You look a little better. Did you get some sleep?"

"Yeah, I got some...sleep," Regina mutters, avoiding both his eyes and Emma's. She wonders if it's possible to tell just by looking that she got more than just sleep. Does she look different? She feels different.

Locksley clearly has more important things than her sex life on his mind, though. "Good," he says, and his hand presses softly against her shoulder for just a second before he clears his throat and barks, "Booth, Humbert, you're next. Get out of here and don't let me see you for six hours."

"You and Jones really lucked out, huh?" Regina asks a bleary-eyed Nolan, setting an extra-large coffee down on his desk. Beside him,

Jones is slumped over on his chair, looking every bit asleep except for the anxious tap of his pencil against the edge of the computer monitor.

"Locksley's apparently under the impression that if he lets us go in the middle of the day, we won't end up at a bar."

"I think he underestimates the amount of alcohol Jones has in his fridge," Emma jokes before announcing that she's going downstairs to check on Whale's progress with the pre-autopsy exams.

Regina's about to ask Jones and Nolan if she missed anything important when ADA Blanchard rushes in, looking about as haggard and upset as the detectives have ever seen her. "Regina, can we talk?" she asks breathlessly. Regina rises to her feet, as do the others, and the young woman's face falls, overwhelmed by the attention.

"Of course," Regina immediately replies, exchanging an apprehensive glace with Locksley. "In the hall, maybe?"

Everyone's eyes follow them out the door as Regina steers Mary Margaret into a quiet spot. She'd wondered how much her coworkers had heard of their rather explosive conversation the night before. Clearly, it was at least enough to be intriguing.

"So, I...um...I visited Walpole earlier this morning," Mary Margaret begins shakily.

"You *what*?"

Ignoring the detective's horrified exclamation – and, in fact, avoiding her eyes entirely – she continues, "They let me see him because he's...well, he's in the infirmary with pneumonia, and he wasn't, like, very responsive, but I asked about Malinda Black and –"

"Mary Margaret!" Regina exclaims, "You shouldn't have done that! The investigation –"

"I know," Mary Margaret interrupts. "Trust me, I know. It wasn't – I wasn't thinking, okay? I just...I had to know, if he could be responsible for that. And I thought if it could help us find that little girl, then..."

Her voice trails off, and Regina's mind races, torn between conflicting desires to offer the young woman comfort and to smack her in the face. *You already know the kinds of things he's responsible for!* she wants to shout. *Why is this any different?*

But she doesn't say that. She doesn't because they've gone through different versions of this conversation enough times that Mary Margaret already knows she's thinking it, and she already knows that the response will be far from positive.

"And?" she demands. "Did you learn anything?"

"He didn't show any recognition when I mentioned her name," Mary Margaret explains, still avoiding Regina's eyes. "And the guards say he hasn't had any contact since the last time I visited. They had him in solitary for a while, and – look, I know you're angry!" she suddenly bursts out, "I know you think I'm an idiot! But he's my father, Regina. I can't...I can't change that, and I can't help wanting to find *anything* good about him to hold onto, even if you think that means wearing rose-colored glasses or whatever. I had to know if he was responsible."

It's far too early in the morning for this conversation.

"So, what do you think?" Regina asks, voice slightly softened. "Did he have something to do with it?"

Mary Margaret finally looks her in the eyes. "I don't think he did."

Regina nods. "Okay, then."

"You believe me?" Mary Margaret asks with a surprised squeak.

Regina shakes her head. "I don't believe what you're telling me," she replies. "I'm sorry, I just...can't. But," she adds, forcing herself to breathe deeply, to ignore the panic that quickly rises up if she allows her thoughts to wander anywhere but the forlorn face of the woman standing directly in front of her, "I do believe *you.*"

It's the best she can do, and she hopes it's enough. Mary Margaret nods. "Thank you," she mutters. "Now, I'll – um...I'll let you get back to investigating."

"Do you want any coffee or donuts?" Regina offers. "I think Emma and I got a bit overexcited; there's enough to feed a small army in there."

Mary Margaret takes one quick, apprehensive look toward the squad room, where all eyes (that are still open, that is) are probably watching the door, waiting with bated breath for their return, and says, "No, thanks. I should...I have stuff to do."

Then she runs off.

Regina returns to her desk with a sigh, and sure enough, three eager heads snap up to stare questioningly at her.

"What did she do?" Locksley asks, running a hand through his hair.

"Nothing," Regina replies shortly. "It's fine. Catch me up on the case?"

"CSU didn't find any new forensics at either crime scene," Nolan grumbles. "But they're still working on the house."

"Alright." Locksley checks his watch and lets out a tired huff. "Malinda Black's sister should be here in about five minutes. Are you ready for her?"

Regina nods along with Nolan and Jones just as Emma reenters the room, looking deeply confused. "This might be awkward, then," she says with a quiet, obviously forced, laugh. "Malinda Black's...not dead."

"What are you talking about?" Jones demands. "Is this The Walking Dead? Is the zombie apocalypse real?"

"No, genius, the woman on the autopsy table didn't just rise from the dead. But," she explains, pausing dramatically and glancing around the room to make sure everyone is listening, "she's *not* Malinda Black."

"What are you talking about?" Locksley groans.

"Malinda Black's one of those militant environmental activists, you know? She's been arrested a few times – protests, stuff like that – so her fingerprints are obviously on file. Whale checked them to match with the victim's, and it's not her."

Nolan rubs his eyes and looks like he wishes he could just crawl into a hole and escape this nonsense, and Regina doesn't blame him. "So...what's going on, then?" he questions. "Someone who is not

Malinda Black but apparently looks just like her was killed, in Malinda Black's living room, and...what the hell?!"

"So, where is the real Malinda Black?" Regina adds. "And what did she do to the Arendts?"

xx

Emma buries her face in her hands and groans loudly, drawing a sympathetic chuckle from Locksley at the other end of the room as he straightens his tie and prepares for yet another press conference. So far, though, nothing much seems to be coming out of them. They still haven't found the Arendts.

Now, of course, they also need to find Malinda Black.

God, they're less than an hour into this day and it's already a fucking disaster.

Meriwether Black had confirmed it: the dead woman in the morgue is not Malinda, but in fact, her other sister, Fauna. Now she's sobbing in the interview room with Mills and Nolan about her fucked up family

and who-knows-what else, and they have another victim's life to dig into, but no one can get a hold of Blanchard.

"Try a different ADA?" Locksley suggests.

Emma sighs and shakes her head. She'll have to. "What the hell did Regina even say to her?" she wonders aloud.

"Could have been anything."

There's a tentative knock at the squad room door, and Officer Fa walks in, brow furrowed in concern. Locksley immediately rises, and Emma offers the younger woman a friendly smile, an apology for yesterday's hostility.

"Lieutenant, may I speak with you?" she asks, back ramrod straight as if standing at attention.

"Briefly," Locksley replies after a quick glance at his watch. He sits atop Emma's desk – which she finds mildly irritating – and gives the officer his full attention.

"I was back at the victim's – err, supposed victim's – house with the crime scene techs, and I found something that might be interesting. I don't really know what to think about it."

"Tell us," Locksley urges.

Fa wrings her hands, nervously chewing at her lower lip. "It's about that picture – the newspaper clipping Detective Mills saw on the wall. It...it was put there recently."

"How can you tell?" Emma asks curiously.

"Tape looks different when it's been on the wall for a while, and Malinda Black was – is? – a smoker, so you'd expect it to start looking a little yellow, eventually. But it looks like it was just taped there earlier that day. The paper itself is old, but the tape was new."

"It could have fallen down, and she re-taped it," Locksley suggests. "That's not unheard of."

Fa shakes her head. "You'd see signs of that, though, in the paper, and there was nothing. And it's odd, I think, that she had this one little picture taped to the wall when everything else was a framed painting. That room was really well arranged, like she had an interior designer in there, and then...this."

Locksley slowly nods. "You have a point. Tape on a newspaper clipping does seem a little 'college dormitory' for a well-to-do woman in her fifties."

"You got a theory?" demands Emma, even as she has a feeling she's *really* not going to like this theory.

"Maybe." Fa looks troubled. "I mean, you weren't there, but Mills was really, really shaken by that picture, and it just seemed...not random, you know? I think it was placed there for a reason."

"Are you joining the 'Leopold White did it' camp, too?" Locksley asks. "Because while I do appreciate that he's done unspeakably awful things in the past, he's currently a quadriplegic in a super-max prison facility whose correspondence is monitored twenty-four hours a day."

"I obviously don't think he was directly involved, but I think whoever did it must have hung the picture there knowing that Mills would see it and would jump to that conclusion, so the perp might be someone who knows about her connection to him. Maybe they meant to throw us – her – off the case. CSU's checking for latent prints now, but it's an old newspaper, so it might be tricky."

Emma sighs and nods her head, thinking that she'd been right: she hates this theory. "You have a point," she admits, "but that includes basically everyone in the city that was old enough to read a newspaper at the time of the case, so I don't know if it helps us."

Locksley's nodding along with her, but suddenly his eyes widen, and he says, "No, that's not it."

"No?" Both women ask at once.

"That would be true if, say, they'd put a picture of Leopold White on the wall, but it wasn't him. It was Eva Blanchard. So, if we're going with the theory that someone put the picture there to spook Regina, then it would have had to be someone who knew that Blanchard had been associated with him."

"That was definitely *not* in the news," Emma agrees. "So we need to find out how many people knew about their relationship?"

Locksley purses his lips and shakes his head, eyes dark. "No, I think we need to find out how many people knew *Regina* knew about their relationship."

Shit, Emma thinks, slumping lower at her desk. It's eight-fifteen, and she's not sure how else this day could get worse.

xx

Mills and Nolan return, dejected, from the interview room. "She knows nothing," Regina grumbles. "Of course. Doesn't seem particularly bright, either." After a few seconds spent angrily shuffling the pile of manila folders on her desk, she finally looks up and notices that both Emma and Robin are staring at her, faces pale and apprehensive.

"Is there a problem?" she asks.

Emma shrugs uncomfortably and Locksley mutters, "Maybe."

Guiltily, Emma watches as Regina sits stiffly at her chair, staring at both of them with so much fear in her eyes that she wants to leap across the space between them and wrap her in the tightest hug she can muster, but Nolan and Jones are there, and while Locksley probably wouldn't mind, given the circumstances, she doubts it falls under his definition of professionalism.

"What?" she demands.

Emma gives the lieutenant a meaningful glance, and he rolls his eyes at her like *she's* somehow the one who's supposed to make this announcement even though he's the commanding officer in charge of this case, not to mention he's known Regina for longer and worked on the White case and probably knows how to phrase things much better.

"Right." Locksley clears his throat. "Okay, so we're not – we *don't* think Leopold White was involved with the murders or the kidnapping."

"Of course you don't."

"But – hear us out – it might be possible that someone tried to use your history with him to attempt to throw us off the case."

Emma can almost see the moment that the proverbial twenty-foot-thick-hundred-foot-high walls go up around Regina, and her heart aches. "How so?" the senior detective demands.

"Officer Fa and the crime scene techs think the photo with Eva may have been – obviously was – hung on the wall recently, and that, like...it wasn't just a random decorating choice," Emma explains in a rush.

Regina looks skeptical. And possibly on the verge of a breakdown.

"And, I mean, why would she have *just* hung it on the wall after – what? – fifteen years? Eva's long dead, right? Malinda Black didn't suddenly become a scrap-booker. It was probably put there for someone –"

"You," Jones supplies unnecessarily, earning a glare from all four of the other occupants of the room.

"To find it."

Regina rubs her temples, wincing. "And who would do that?" she asks exhaustedly. "*Why* would they do that?"

Emma desperately wishes she didn't have to say the words that are coming out of her mouth. "We were kind of hoping you might have some ideas. Since, you know, you're the one who knew White."

Regina shoots her an icy glare, which Emma supposes is better than no response at all.

"What we'd like to figure out," Locksley says gently, "is who knew about the connection between Leopold White and Eva Blanchard. And, perhaps more importantly, who knew that you knew about it?"

After blinking several times and rubbing her eyes, Regina finally mutters, "Nobody." Her voice is raspy and hollow. "He didn't tell anyone – he didn't trust anyone except for me, that was the whole point. And it wasn't...I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want -"

Her eyes flicker briefly to Nolan before turning downward.

"But?" Emma prompts, knowing there must be a "but" in there somewhere.

"Except –" Regina's faces goes through several shades of red and purple and her lips twitch painfully before she answers "- I was wearing a wire through most of our interactions. I assume Midas and Spencer were listening."

Locksley's eyes narrow.

Emma has heard of Lieutenant Midas, of course, but the other name is new to her. "Who's Spencer?" she inquires.

"Someone you're incredibly lucky to have never worked with."

Nolan shudders. "He might be the person I like least in the entire world."

"That's a glowing recommendation," Emma comments drily, but her coworkers aren't listening.

"Did you two just agree on something?" Jones's eyes widen in disbelief. "That's shocking."

"It appears that we did," says Nolan. He offers Regina an approving handshake, which she accepts.

"Wow, okay, you hate the same person. That's cute." Emma rolls her eyes and taps a pencil impatiently on her desk. "Now can someone please tell me who he is so we can get back to what's really important here? Should I start investigating this guy, or what?"

"He's a retired detective – sergeant, actually, by the time he retired," Nolan explains. "He was my partner when I first started working this unit, and I think he played the same role for Mills?"

Regina nods. "People call Regina the Evil Queen," Locksley informs Emma, "but Albert Spencer didn't have any nicknames because people would shudder at the very mention of him."

"Okay, enough," Regina snaps, fingers clutching the table tightly as she rises on unsteady legs. "We don't need story time, we need to catch a killer before it's too late."

"So, this Spencer," Emma asks, laying a hand lightly on Regina's arm, "why are we talking about him? What's the connection here?"

"There is none," Regina says quickly. "Yes, he knew everything that I knew about the case, but that's...that's it. I doubt he has any connection to these killings."

"He's the scum of the earth," Locksley adds with a hand on Regina's other shoulder, "and I would be unsurprised, to say the least, if he was dirty in some way, but you're right. And anyway, we'd need solid

evidence, or *any* evidence, before we started leveling accusations at a high-ranking former cop."

"And Midas?" Emma asks, just for the sake of checking.

"Retired in Florida," Nolan reports. "If his Christmas cards are any indication, he's having a great time and not thinking about Boston or criminals at all."

"Sounds nice," Locksley comments under his breath. "What about – I know this is a long-shot, but since ADA Blanchard obviously knew-"

"No," Regina says flatly.

"But if she'd told a friend, perhaps-"

"She didn't really have any, and then...just – just drop it, Robin."

Jones sighs. "So, that leaves us with...who?"

"Malinda Black?" Emma suggests. "I mean, no offense, guys, but it seems like we're living in the past a little here and forgetting that, up to the point we thought she was dead, Malinda Black was our main suspect

in the case we're actually trying to solve, which is the Arendts' disappearance."

Regina looks at her sheepishly and forces a chuckle. "It seems that whoever was trying to throw us off the case was successful. I'm sorry."

"I mean, I'm not saying these connections aren't worth exploring, since you know, obviously, this person *did* know that information and all of that," Emma sputters out, trying hurriedly to reassure her. Her hand rubs up and down lightly as she explains, "I just think we should maybe start with what's right in front of us."

"From the mouths of rookies!" Locksley declares. "Let's get back to it."

Emma stays in place for a moment while the other detectives return to their desks and Locksley jogs out to speak to the news crews, pulling Regina in for a brief embrace once she's sure no one's watching. "You okay?" she whispers.

"What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Just checking. Anything I can do?"

Regina sighs heavily, sagging against Emma for just a second before pulling herself back up. "Let's just find Elsa Arendt. If she's safe,

then...then I suppose that's what matters."

"You think she's still alive after being missing so long?"

"I don't know." Regina's face is pained, her voice straining in her throat and obviously thick with the frightened tears she's just barely holding back. "But she needs to be."

xx

She starts to notice the bruises a few weeks after meeting Mary Margaret, but she doesn't actually put the pieces together until one day when she's helping the young girl prepare for her school dance, and she notices the unmistakable black and blue imprint of a large hand on her ribcage. Sick to her stomach, she instantly forgets everything about her undercover persona and shifts into cop-mode.

"Mary Margaret," she demands in a horrified whisper, "what happened?"

"It's nothing," Mary Margaret replies immediately, tugging her shirt down in shame. "It's just...nothing."

"Mary Margaret, who hurt you?" Regina asks softly as she takes the girl's hand in her own. "Please, tell me what happened. I can help you."

"How?" she demands, face guarded, and Regina thinks she's about to lose her lunch because Mary Margaret is right – there is absolutely no way Gina Miliota could possibly help her (nor would she probably care to), and Regina Mills isn't allowed to surface. At the moment, though, that matters very little to her.

She reaches into her wallet, remembers at the last second that she can't hand over her business card – buried in there beneath her fake license and fake credit cards – without ruining absolutely everything, and gives the girl Daniel's instead.

"Call him," she urges. "Tell him I sent you. He'll make sure you get all the help you need, I promise."

Mary Margaret scowls. "I don't need any help," she insists, but she pockets the business card and Regina slowly exhales as she leaves the room, hoping against hope that it's not what she thinks and everything will somehow be fine.

Her partner is irate.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Spencer demands. "Are you trying to risk months – years *for some of us – of hard work? Just so you can protect a stupid little girl?"*

"Protect and serve, that's what we do," Regina replies with a hollow laugh. "Right?"

"Fucking affirmative action hires," he seethes. "You don't belong on the force, and I did nothing to deserve the indignity of working with you. So you know what, Mills? When you eventually blow your cover and throw out our entire investigation – and I guarantee that you will do both of those things - I won't be here. It'll only be your career getting destroyed, and I'll just laugh when you're up the river without a paddle. Understood?"

"Yeah, sure," she mutters, but she doesn't understand what exactly he means by "up the river without a paddle" until about two weeks later when she's shoved against a wall, White's forearm pressed across her throat as his face inches closer to hers and she can smell the gin on his breath. Her first thought is of the microphone taped on the inside of her bra. Straining and choking, she hisses, "Apple." It's their safe word, supposed to immediately draw back-up when spoken, but she waits and waits and nothing happens.

It's then that she realizes she's in this investigation alone, that no one's coming to help her – no one is ever coming – so she does the only thing she can do to come out of it alive: she closes her eyes and lets it happen, praying to a god she's sure isn't listening to please, please let him be too drunk to notice the wire.

In that, at least, she gets lucky.

xx

Mary Margaret's back, bringing with her subpoenas for every bit of Malinda Black's personal information so that all six detectives can pore over it in detail while stuffing their faces with Hawaiian pizza. Jones and Nolan – in spite of their exhaustion and irritability from lack of sleep – had refused to leave even after Booth and Humbert returned, and Locksley hadn't said anything further about it. No one can sleep, anyway. At this point, they're all running purely on caffeine and adrenaline.

"Well, she's quite obviously not dead," Jones remarks. "Or at least whoever is using her credit card is alive and well."

"Cell phone, too."

"So, you're thinking someone faked her death and stole her identity?" the ADA asks, confused. She's made no effort to conceal the fact that he thinks their theory on the case is convoluted at best, but she's fighting for them with Judge Gold – and winning – so no one can really complain about her excessive questions.

"Maybe," Emma replies, mouth full of pizza, "or maybe she faked her own death to throw us off the case. Give her more time to hide the bodies."

"Although, if you were going to fake your own death, you'd probably want to stop using your credit card, if you know what I mean," Booth muses, shaking his head. "Kind of a giveaway."

"Perhaps," Regina says darkly.

The senior detective has been mostly silent since the ADA's arrival, and Mary Margaret has spoken to everyone except her. (And Nolan, who's slumped at his desk like a pouting child for some reason.) It makes things awkward. Emma doesn't like it.

Although, now that she knows Mary Margaret is Leopold White's daughter...

Actually, no, it doesn't change anything. It just means everything about her mercurial relationship with Regina makes a lot more sense.

"Whoa!" Humbert suddenly exclaims. "She just made a charge ten minutes ago."

"Where?" Locksley demands, sprinting out of his office as all of the detectives gather around behind Graham's desk, shoving each other to gain a better view of his computer screen.

"Convenience store in South Boston," he reports. "Near the waterfront."

"Print that address," Locksley orders. "Nolan, Mills, you're up. Show her picture to everyone in the area. Bring Elsa's too. Humbert, Booth – trail them as back-up. Swan, Jones – you're on call here until further notice."

"Is it just me, or does he not trust me?" Jones mutters as he slides into the chair beside Emma's.

She ignores him, walking up quickly behind Regina and giving her hand a squeeze as she approaches the door, firm and resolute. "Please be careful," she says softly.

"We'll do whatever it takes," Regina replies.

It's not a particularly satisfying answer, Emma thinks with a sigh as she sits back down and shoves another slice of pizza in her mouth. This is going to be a long evening.

xx

"You're absolutely certain you've never seen her?" Regina asks the third business owner in the neighborhood of the convenience store at which the charge had been made. So far, no one has recognized the picture.

"Never," he replies. "Only folks that come around these parts are the guys that work in the warehouses 'cross the street."

Warehouses, she thinks, exchanging a quick glance with Nolan.

"So, all the buildings on that side of the street are active shipping warehouses?" she asks urgently.

"Don't know about active, ma'am," he replies. "Two over there are shipping operations – they get good business – but the canneries have been down on their luck with the economy, and the meat-packing one down at the end is all but abandoned."

"Abandoned," she hisses to Nolan.

He smiles warmly at the shopkeeper and thanks him for his time before she drags him out the door and grabs their vests from the trunk of the

car.

"We’re going in, then?" he questions.

"If that building is abandoned, tell me why there's a van next to it."

"Free parking?" he guesses, but he dutifully radios Booth and Humbert and tells them to watch the exits.

Regina smiles tightly, thinking for a second about how much she enjoys being in charge, before grabbing them two flashlights from the trunk of the car and walking quickly toward the building, forcing Nolan to jog to catch up.

xx

The warehouse is dark and silent, but there's a smell pervading the air that says in no uncertain terms that they'll find the bodies they're looking for. Regina shines her flashlight around a corner and whispers, "All clear on the left," to Nolan, who nods (she's not quite sure how she can hear him nod, but she does), and shines his around the other side.

He suppresses a gag at what he sees. "I think these are the Arendts," he mumbles, and Regina has to agree after she turns to look. "I guess we can confirm they're dead."

"Radio it in. Now we need to find Malinda Black, and the child," she says, trying to hide her desperation. Flashlight in one hand and gun in the other, she sidesteps around the corner to get a better look as her partner mutters into his walkie-talkie.

"Nothing here," she reports. "I'm going in a bit deeper." She thinks she might see a lump on the floor behind some shelving.

"Got your back," Nolan promises, and she feels strangely safe when she hears his soft footfalls following her through the darkened building. Perhaps the idiot is growing on her.

That is, until she nearly trips over what feels like an arm and bites down hard on her tongue to keep from crying out.

Nolan shines his light down at the floor and asks, surprised, "Is that Malinda Black?"

It certainly looks like her, Regina thinks, hoping her nod confirms his query without her having to speak, because she doesn't think she can. Bending down over the bound and gagged body – it feels warm – she presses her fingers against the woman's throat. She's still alive, but badly injured and unconscious.

"Pulse?" he whispers.

She nods again.

"Should we start CPR?"

There's no chance to answer, because in an instant, both detectives are on guard, guns pointed, as heavy footsteps echo throughout the huge building. "Who's there?" she hollers, finally finding her voice.

"This is the Boston Police!" Nolan calls, shining his flashlight in the space in front of him. "Step into the light with your hands where I can see them."

Suddenly, they're stunned by the sound of a shot reverberating off of every surface, and another, and another, and the stench of death in the air is replaced by faint residue of gunpowder. In the darkness, Regina can't tell where any of it came from, but beside her, Nolan doubles over, clutching his leg, and the beam of her flashlight reveals that his hand is stained with blood.

"David!" she exclaims. "Are you –"

"Just nicked me," he grits out, gesturing wildly to his left. "Came from over there. Get the shooter."

Blindly, she races through the pitch black warehouse, flashlight shaking wildly in her hand as its faint beam does little to reveal what's in front of her. She trips once or twice, but quickly regains her footing, driven forward by the sound of the shooter's steps growing closer and closer.

He's slow. She's gaining ground. She nearly falls on her face as he drops his gun to the floor and it ends up under her feet, but she keeps running – she can see him now.

Until she passes what looks like an industrial freezer and thinks she hears a faint noise – a whimper, perhaps – coming from the inside.

"Regina, what the hell are you doing?" Nolan exclaims angrily. His words imply the same thought that's pounding in her head: *Get the shooter!*, but her heart is telling her to rescue the victim, and for better or worse, her body is listening to her heart.

Prying open the freezer door, she shines her flashlight inside, and her heart nearly stops as her eyes fall on a tiny child in the corner, nearly unconscious but still crying softly. She leans over the edge, straining to reach down to grab the girl.

"Are you Elsa?" she asks.

The reply sounds like it's meant to be a scream, but it only comes out as a tiny, hoarse mew, like a dying cat. She's badly dehydrated, Regina realizes.

"Hey Elsa," she says softly. "My name is Regina. I'm a police officer. I'm going to help you, alright?"

Another cry, this one a little less frightened but still horribly painful.

"You're safe now, baby. I won't let anyone hurt you. We're going to take you to the hospital first, and then you can see your sister."

Elsa's ears perk up at that, and Regina has to choke back tears. "Anna's fine. She's in a safe place with people who are taking really good care of her, and once you're healthy, we'll take you there, too, so you can be together. Would you like that?"

Shaking, the little girl gives the smallest, weakest of nods, and Regina breathes a sigh of relief. "Okay, baby, I'm going to pick you up now. Is that alright?"

As much as she can – which isn't much, considering what her tiny body must have been through over the last few days – Elsa inches closer to Regina, and the detective scoops her against her chest, rocking back and forth on her feet and rubbing her back in small circles. The freezer

hadn't been plugged in, but she's still so cold. Regina nudges the tiny, frigid hands under her armpits and shrugs her shoulders up and down to create some friction and warm them up. "You're safe, sweetheart. I'm going to keep you safe, I promise," she soothes, feeling each of her muscles slowly unclench as the sound of sirens finally begins to fill the air.

Nolan, breathing heavily and unevenly, limps over to them, his shirt ripped off and tied around his leg wound. "Regina!" he snaps."What were you – oh."

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "He got away, but I had to –"

Nolan looks long and hard at the trembling toddler slowly relaxing into Regina's arms and nods, swallowing hard. "We'll get him later," he mutters. "Whoever he is, he can't run forever."

xx

Hours later, Regina quietly sings every lullaby she can think of as she rocks Elsa back and forth until, finally, the distraught toddler drifts off to sleep. Sighing, she glances around the Urgent Care room that's lit dimly only by the red exit sign at the end of the hall. It's three in the morning, she needs to use the bathroom, and her arms are numb from

holding the little girl, who consistently starts screaming the instant Regina's hold on her lessens even slightly.

Drained and exhausted as she is, though, she can't help but smile as a sleeping Elsa curls against her chest, lightly sucking her thumb and finally looking like she's at peace.

"I've got you, baby," she whispers, leaning back into the uncomfortable hospital bed and curling her legs up under her to help support the weight in her arms. "You're safe. I won't let them hurt you, ever again."

She has to stay alert. She's the only one here to protect Elsa from harm – not that, realistically speaking, there'd be someone coming after her, but Regina is too sleep-deprived at the moment to even consider thinking realistically.

She gently runs her fingers through the soft blonde curls and kisses the top of Elsa's head, clutching the sleeping girl closer as her own anxiety bubbles up inside her at the prospect of spending the night in a hospital room. "I will protect you, no matter what; I promise," she tells her, willing her heart to stop pounding – at this rate, it's going to wake her patient.

In. Out.

"It's okay," she thinks aloud. "Everything is fine. It's just one night."

They'd had to run a number of tests on Elsa and treat her for dehydration and hypothermia, all of which had taken far longer than it should have due to her emotional duress and the fact that she refused to allow anyone to touch her except for Regina, and now they're keeping her overnight for observation before an appointment with the child psychiatrist in the morning and, if all goes well, they'll then move her to the same foster home as her sister.

Regina had volunteered to stay with her – well, not that she'd had much of a choice, since the screams that came at the prospect that she was going to leave had practically destroyed everyone's hearing – thinking it would be fine. She'd assumed that the disappearance of all the nurses except one making emergency night rounds would make the hospital less overwhelming, but now it's dark and eerie and she's alone.

Except for this tiny child she's vowed to protect.

"I won't fail you," she whispers to Elsa. "I *will* keep you safe."

"Need any help with that?" asks a voice from the doorway, and Regina nearly jumps out of her skin in shock, reaching for her gun. Elsa whimpers softly in her arms before quickly falling back to sleep, too exhausted to be afraid anymore. Regina wishes she could say the same for herself.

But then she looks up, heart racing wildly in her chest, and sees that it's Emma. It's just Emma.

She looks extremely contrite and says, "Sorry, I'm wearing my slippers. You must not have heard me coming."

"I didn't," Regina confirms breathlessly. "Obviously."

"Sorry about that," Emma says again. "I brought you a sandwich. I figured you'd be awake and maybe hungry."

"You figured right."

Emma hums and sits down on the bed beside Regina, head rested on her shoulder and one hand rubbing her back in slow, calming circles. "She's so little," she remarks. "I forget sometimes, you know. It's been a while since Henry was that size."

"Indeed."

"How's she doing?"

"She's...she watched her parents get murdered and was trapped alone in an industrial freezer for days. It was unplugged and there were a couple of air holes, thankfully, but...she's doing about as well as you'd expect."

Emma nods solemnly. "She's lucky in one respect, though," she points out. "She's got you."

As if on cue, Elsa nestles her face deeper into Regina's chest, and both women laugh quietly.

And then Regina's stomach growls.

"I can hold her while you eat," Emma offers. "I mean, if you don't think it will wake her up."

Regina nods. Elsa's sleeping pretty soundly now – the doctors may have slipped her some sedatives to help with that; Regina's not really sure. "If you don't mind, I might run to the bathroom first."

Slowly, carefully, they transfer the toddler into Emma's arms. She barely stirs. Regina jogs off to use the restroom as fast as possible, and when she comes back, she sees Emma singing to the little girl and tenderly kissing her forehead.

"W'gina?" Elsa murmurs sleepily.

"Right here," she says quickly, sitting on the bed beside Emma and putting her arms around both of them. "This is my friend, Emma. She's here to protect you, too."

Elsa nods. "'Kay," she mumbles with a longing gaze toward Regina, and the detective feels an ache rise in her chest, her arms craving the weight of a child again.

Emma seems to understand. "I won't keep you two apart any longer," she says with a grin, ruffling Elsa's hair as she passes her off to her partner.

"My W'gina," Elsa says before sticking her thumb back in her mouth and closing her eyes.

"You've got pretty good taste, kid," Emma chuckles. "She's my favorite, too."

Elsa's already half asleep again, and Regina lies back in the bed, much calmer now that Emma is with them, and hugs the girl snugly against her chest. She catches Emma staring, a strange expression in her eyes. "What?" she demands softly.

"You're...never mind, it's nothing."

"Tell me."

"It's just...Nolan said you seemed 'smitten,' and I wasn't exactly sure what he meant by it, but...yeah, you do seem very smitten."

"What's not to be smitten about?" she asks, feeling her heart melt as she stares down at the brave little girl who looks at her like she's her own personal guardian angel – yes, there's no point in denying it: she's crazy about her.

"Not saying there's anything wrong with that," Emma says quickly. "It's great. You look beautiful – you're basically glowing right now."

"But?"

"No buts. Just...pointing it out. Paying a compliment, maybe."

"Right."

"And," she observes, "I'd say she's pretty much in love with you, too."

"She's a traumatized child, seeking comfort," Regina argues.

"From you, because you know how to give it. You're the only one who understands. Not to mention the fact that you're the one who saved her."

"I was merely in the right place at the right time. If I'd been shot and Nolan was pursuing the shooter, he would have heard –"

"Stop, you're gonna wake up the kid if you keep fighting with me. You, Regina Mills, are a hero," Emma says, punctuating the declaration with a kiss on the tip of Regina's nose. "And I'm sure Elsa would agree with me if she were awake right now."

Regina hopes the dim light of the darkened hospital room hides the blush that rushes up her cheeks. She's spent the last eleven years of her life being called a hero, for reasons she's mostly failed to understand. Yes, her actions had led to the arrest of a vicious serial killer, but not until after he'd managed to destroy everyone who mattered to her, in various horrifying ways. Shooting him after the fact wasn't heroism, it was self-defense.

And today, she'd let *someone* go free – they're still not quite sure who, since Booth and Humbert had somehow missed an exit – who'd killed at least three people, injured another, kept a child imprisoned in an abandoned meat-packing plant, and shot her partner. Nolan, saint that he is, had told her it was okay, that she'd done the right thing, but still. She can't stop kicking herself that she could have, should have, done better, and Emma knows it.

"We've got footprints in the mud outside the warehouse and fingerprints on the gun, not to mention a BOLO out on the car. We'll find him, Regina. If you'd taken too long to nab him – if there'd been a struggle – who knows how much longer Elsa could have held on in there. A life was at stake and you saved it."

It's true, she thinks, softly kissing the little girl's head. She'd made a judgment call, and she's holding the result of it in her arms, and she can't say she has any regrets.

"I made the right choice," she says softly.

"You wouldn't be a hero if you didn't occasionally doubt yourself."

"Can you please stop using that word?" Regina demands.

"It fits," Emma says, sticking her tongue out. "Whether you like it or not, you're my hero, and I love the crap out of you. So does this kid, even if she's not awake to say it."

The blush is back, warming her cheeks all the way down to the depths of her soul that she thinks might just be on fire, with Emma's arms around her and a child against her chest – finally, a child she's successfully protected.

"And, you know," Emma adds, a playful smile turning up the corners of her lips, "there's something special that always happens to heroes at the end of those fairytales Henry's always reading."

"Oh? What's that."

"True love's kiss, of course."

Regina's grinning so hard her cheeks hurt as Emma leans in, careful not to wake Elsa – who's now lightly snoring – and gently runs her fingers along her jaw before kissing her in a manner befitting the hero of the tale. It's chaste (there's a sleeping toddler between them), but there's something deeply meaningful embedded in it, too, a promise of tomorrow, perhaps many tomorrows, of dragons slain and maidens rescued and the two of them hand in hand, come what may.

Theirs is not exactly a fairytale romance; it's raw and hard and occasionally painful, with no fairy godmothers to grant them their happily ever after. But it's real, and now more than ever, she realizes that's what makes it worth fighting for.

And she knows that she has what it takes to keep fighting.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> TW: While nothing explicitly bad actually happens in this chapter, the case is obviously still going on and discussions of it throughout the chapter will include mentions of murder, captivity, etc.

The pediatric wing becomes a zoo a little after six in the morning, full of beeping monitors and nurses rushing up and down the halls and screaming children. Regina blinks, disoriented, glancing frantically around the room to gain her bearings. She deduces quickly that she's in a hospital bed, which causes a momentary panic, but then she calms at the realization that Elsa is on top of her, just beginning to stir, and Emma is still sound asleep wedged against her right side, and she feels safe and warm and contained.

And, strangely enough, damp.

Searching for the source of the sensation, her gaze travels down to her stomach, where Elsa is staring timidly up at her with reddening cheeks.

"W'gina," she whispers, "I...I think I..."

"Oh."

This is certainly a novel way to wake up, she thinks exasperatedly, but poor Elsa looks so upset about it that Regina can't bring herself to be angry.

"That's alright, dear," she says with a reassuring smile. "We'll just find both of us some new clothes, I suppose, and get cleaned up."

"Sorry," Elsa mumbles sheepishly, though her slight lisp makes it sound more like "sowwy," and Regina finds herself smiling in spite of having her clothes soaked with a child's urine.

"Don't worry, sweetheart." She kisses Elsa's forehead and says in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'm sure the nurses keep plenty of extra gowns around for just this purpose."

It takes little time or effort to find a nurse to bring over some dry clothes, but it takes considerably more (and a whole lot of screaming that eventually wakes Emma) to convince Elsa to allow anyone besides Regina to help her clean or even be present in the room while it happens. Finally, Regina dismisses the flustered woman and gives Elsa – who immediately calms as soon as the nurse leaves – a sponge bath and puts her in a fresh hospital gown without incident.

"Cute," Emma teases from the bed, "I should add this one to the scrapbook: 'W'gina's' first adventures in parenting."

Regina sighs in acknowledgment as she tugs off her own wet clothes. "First?" she wonders aloud. That makes it sound like there'll be others.

Emma shrugs and demands, "What happened, kid?"

"I had an accident," Elsa replies, blushing furiously.

"Aw, man. Well, you win some, you lose some. Happens to everyone."

Elsa shakes her head and stares at the floor, mumbling, "Big girls don't have accidents."

"Sometimes they do," Emma argues. "Big boys, too. Last year, my son Henry peed his pants on a rollercoaster because he was so scared. He was nine."

Elsa giggles. "That's silly."

"He didn't think so at the time. He was so mad. And we didn't have any clean clothes for him, either, so I made him put a trash bag on the seat when we drove home."

"Poor Henry," Regina murmurs. "He probably wouldn't be happy to know you're telling this story."

"Nope!" Emma laughs, looking extremely pleased with herself, and Regina shakes her head in confusion. She doesn't realize what the other woman had been attempting to do until Elsa suddenly turns back around right before she can slip on the scrubs she'd been handed.

She tries to keep herself from groaning as the little girl's wide eyes fixate on the one place she'd prefer they didn't.

"W'gina, what's that on your belly?" Elsa asks interestedly, reaching up a tentative finger to poke at the scar tissue through the thin cotton. Regina's first impulse is to bat the hand away, but the stops herself just in time.

"I...I...it's..." She fumbles for words, looking to Emma for guidance, but the younger woman only flashes her a thumbs up and mouths "You got this," which isn't particularly helpful.

Emma mimes taking deep breaths, and Regina reluctantly imitates her.

"It's called a scar," she finally explains. "Sometimes when people get a really big cut, it gets better but not all the way, and it looks a little bit like this."

"Oh," Elsa replies. She considers the answer for a moment and seems to accept it, and Emma mouths "Nailed it." Elsa comments, "That's a really big scar," before sticking her thumb back in her mouth and clambering back onto the bed.

"Some help would have been nice," Regina hisses.

"Why? I would have jumped in if you'd needed it, but you handled that perfectly. You're really good with kids, actually." Regina accepts the compliment with a stiff nod and tries desperately to direct her thoughts elsewhere, and Emma continues, "Have you ever thought about it?"

"Thought about what? Having kids? I think the aforementioned scar should be all the answer you need."

She hopes with every fiber of her being that Emma will just drop it, but she just keeps talking, seemingly oblivious. "No, I mean, like...I don't know. Trying again? Like, adoption or foster care or something like that. I just think you'd be a great parent, you know? And Henry, who's much smarter than me, also thinks that, so..." she trails off as she notices Regina's tight lips and downcast eyes. "Shit, I'm sorry. That's – I shouldn't have –"

"It's fine," Regina mutters, though it's clearly not and Emma knows it. "I...yes, I've thought about it. But, for the most part, single women who work long hours at dangerous jobs aren't considered ideal candidates. And when people see you're in treatment for PTSD, well...you can imagine how quickly the application gets rejected."

"Shit," Emma says again. "Yeah, I guess I didn't think about that. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have even brought it up."

Regina waves her hand dismissively and lies, "It's fine. But can you please stop using bad words in front of three-year-olds? No wonder your son speaks the way he does."

Elsa, sensing the topic of conversation has turned to her, immediately perks up. "I know 'shit,'" she informs the two women. "My daddy says it in the car, but it's not nice." But then her face falls and she whispers, "Emma, W'gina, did my mommy and daddy die?"

Emma nods sadly, and Regina sits down next to Elsa on the bed and pulls the little girl into her arms. "They did, sweetheart," she replies. "I'm so sorry."

Though clearly saddened by the knowledge, Elsa seems unsurprised. "The bad man did it," she says before burying her face in Regina's hair.

"The bad man?" Emma asks. "Can you tell us more about him? Like what he looks like?"

But Elsa sticks her thumb back in her mouth and doesn't say anything else, and Regina shakes her head at Emma, darkened eyes warning her not to push. So, Emma doesn't push. She sits silently on the bed for a

few moments while Regina rubs Elsa's back and quietly sings. Then she informs them that she's going to the station and that Locksley and Dr. Hopper are supposed to come by in about an hour to talk to Elsa, and she kisses Regina's lips and Elsa's forehead before exiting the room and saying she'll text about dinner.

And Regina stares after her, wondering at the strange domesticity of all of it. It's a routine they fall into so easily, and she's not sure why, but she's becoming increasingly sure that she likes it. Someday, she could see –

No. She can't allow herself that thought, not now. Perhaps in the heat of victory, she'd forgotten for a moment that there are still long and vicious battles to be fought. How can she dream of a future when the present is still so uncertain?

As if in agreement, Elsa lets out the smallest of whimpers, and Regina quickly returns her focus to soothing the distraught toddler, relegating any and all thoughts about "someday" with Emma to the deepest recesses of her heart.

xx

As promised, Locksley shows up around seven-thirty with Dr. Hopper in tow. "I just got her to sleep," Regina complains, stroking the soft hair

of the slumbering child on her lap. Elsa's thumb is in her mouth and her face is streaked with tears, but now that her eyes are shut and she's huddled against Regina's chest again, she looks so peaceful that it seems almost cruel to wake her.

Locksley nods. "Good," he says quietly, "then I can ask you a few questions first, just to get the incident report sorted out. I got most of the details from Nolan already – he'll be fine, by the way; the bullet just grazed him, so a few days with his leg elevated and he'll be good to go – and he says you two entered the warehouse, found Malinda Black tied up on the ground, and then the guns started firing. Does that sound right to you?"

Regina tries to hide the way that she practically sags with relief at the news that Nolan's alright: no one needs to know that she's allowed another one of those idiots to worm his way into her heart. Schooling her features into what she hopes is an inscrutable expression, she swallows the lump in her throat and confirms, "Yes. We found Malinda Black, but we didn't – we weren't able to start CPR because, as you said, the guns started firing – only one gun, though, that I know of. And then Nolan was shot, obviously." And, of course, she'd forgotten all about their other victim.

As if sensing her worry, Locksley pats Regina's shoulder and says, "Malinda Black's alive. Comatose, but alive. She'll be...well, anyway, the doctors are hopeful."

"Good," mutters Regina. No, not good – comatose witnesses can't talk – but still, better alive than dead.

"Then what happened? In your words?"

"I took off after the shooter. It was dark, so I couldn't see him very well –"

"You're sure it's a him?"

Regina shrugs helplessly. "I suppose it doesn't have to be," she concedes, "but Elsa said 'the bad man' killed her parents, so I just assumed..."

He's kind enough to put a stop to her faltering. "Right. Okay, so you're chasing the shooter. Then what?"

"The shooter tossed the gun at some point," Regina recalls. "I was gaining on...them. And then I heard –"

She gestures to Elsa and the lieutenant nods knowingly. "Nolan said she was in a freezer," he remarks, brow tightened in concerned rage. Regina pats him on the shoulder – darken her features a bit and change her gender, and Elsa isn't too different from Roland, and she can tell he's thinking the same.

"She was. The freezer wasn't *on*," she quickly reassures him, "but yes, she was inside. I heard her crying and I...I let the shooter go. I'm sorry."

"No one's faulting you, Regina," Hopper cuts in immediately.

"No," Locksley sighs, "it appears that everyone shares the blame for letting the shooter go free, but nothing's worth the loss of a child." He cocks his head toward Elsa and Regina nods.

"So, what happens next?" she asks, one arm tightening protectively around the little girl.

"Next, we ask Elsa some questions, whenever she wakes up.

"And then she does to the foster home with Anna?" Regina looks questioningly at the shrink, echoing what Emma had told her last night.

"That's the plan."

"What if –" she starts to ask, but then quickly stops herself. No use voicing the concern if there's nothing they can do about it.

"What if what?" Robin demands.

She shakes her head. "It's nothing. Forget it."

Locksley hums quietly and settles down on the edge of the bed. "You alright?" he demands, as though he's only just noticed her attire. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"I decided to retire early and take up nursing," she says sarcastically.

"No, really – are you injured, too?"

"Only my dignity." He still looks slightly confused. "Come on, Robin. You're a father, there's a toddler sleeping on top of me, the nurses have been pumping fluids into her all night...do the math."

It takes a few seconds – he must not have slept much – but then he's cracking up. "Sorry!" he wheezes in between peals of laughter. "It's just...oh god. Toddler pee on your clothes!"

Even Archie is cackling with uncharacteristic evil, and Regina glares at both of them. "You're going to wake her," she scolds.

"Sorry." Robin pushes his fist against his mouth and apologetically pats Regina's shoulder. "I was just nervous you'd gotten hurt in the chase, and

then..."

"As I said, only my dignity."

The three adults settle into a comfortable silence, watching Elsa sleep. Finally, Locksley breaks it, as though he's just remembered something, "You mentioned that she said the 'bad man' killed her parents?"

"Yes."

"So, she witnessed it?"

It's horribly early in the morning for all of these questions. "Maybe? She – she asked me if her parents were dead, I confirmed that they were, and then she said, 'The bad man did it.' At the very least, she saw someone do something."

"She say anything else about this guy?"

"No. Emma tried to ask her about him, but she –"

"Emma? Detective Swan was here?"

"Yes. Is that not alright?"

He jerks his head from side to side in a non-answer. "How bad is it?" he asks.

"How bad is *what*?"

"Her...you know..."

"Trauma?" Regina guesses, rolling her eyes. "Robin, it's not a dirty word." Hopper offers her an encouraging smile.

"I know. I just...yeah, I know," he mutters embarrassedly. "I just didn't want to assume anything about what she went through when –"

"Well, I'm not an expert," she answers, putting him out of his backtracking misery, "but I think you can safely assume it's bad."

Hopper nods, tight-lipped. "Given what she went through – or what we think she went through," he amends, "I wouldn't expect healing to be an easy process."

"Do you think she'll be able to talk to us, though?" Robin asks. "I don't want to force it, but she's our only witness right now." At Regina's stricken glance, he quickly clarifies, "I *won't* force it."

"Good."

Elsa's starting to stir, staring around the room disoriented until her eyes land on Locksley and Hopper and she curls even tighter against Regina. "W'gina?" she mumbles. "Who are they?"

"Good morning, sweetheart," Regina says softly, kissing the bleary-eyed toddler on the forehead and ignoring her colleagues' raised eyebrows, "these are my friends Robin and Archie. They're here to talk to you."

"Hi," Elsa whispers, barely looking up as her arms snake around Regina's neck.

"They want to ask you some questions about your parents, so they can put the bad man in jail. Is that okay?"

Elsa burrows her face deeper into the detective's chest as if Regina is her oversized stuffed animal and mumbles something incoherent.

"Sorry, baby, I didn't hear that."

"Don't go," she says a little louder.

"Of course not. I'll be right here the whole time," Regina promises, rubbing Elsa's back and shooting a warning glare at Robin, who puts his hands up and shrugs as if to remind her that he *does* have four years experience of dealing with kids.

And she knows that – she *does*. Even before Roland came along, he treated kids on cases as if they were his own. He'll probably be better at this than she is.

But there's still something inside her that's ready to fight anyone in this damned hospital who so much as looks at her baby the wrong way.

She's not even yours.

"Elsa," Archie says gently, "what can you tell us about what happened to your parents?"

"The bad man killed them – and the lady," she tells Regina's chest.

"Was the lady, by any chance, one of these ladies?" Robin asks, pulling out an page with six photos. Elsa's body tenses, and it takes a few

minutes of rocking and whispered reassurances for her to poke her head out for long enough to look at the array and tentatively point to Malinda Black.

"She hurt Mommy," she says solemnly.

"Did she do anything else?"

Elsa shakes her head. "The man did."

Robin nods and puts away the photos. "Well, we have to find this man, then. Did you get a good look at him?"

"Mmhmm." She hides her face again and tightens her hold on Regina's neck.

"Locksley –"

"What if we play a game," Robin suddenly suggests. "I'm going to ask you questions and you only have to say yes or no, or move your head if you don't want to talk. Does that sound better?"

After a brief pause, Elsa nods.

"Good. And if you want to talk more, then we'll stop and listen," Archie adds as Regina shifts Elsa upwards so the little girl's head is resting on her shoulder.

Twisting from side to side to crack her back, she whispers, "If you want them to leave, just tell me, and I'll make them disappear."

That gets Elsa's attention. "Like magic?" she asks.

"Yes, just like magic." Gently running her fingers through Elsa's soft but matted hair – maybe she should have given her a full bath earlier – Regina nods to Locksley and mouths, "Get on with it."

"Okay, Elsa, this man – did he have green skin?"

That gets a reaction – Elsa sits up and looks him directly in the eyes. "What? No."

"How about blue skin?"

"That's silly!" she protests, but she's starting to smile just a tiny bit.

"Pink skin?"

"W'gina," Elsa says in what's probably supposed to be a whisper, "your friend isn't very smart."

"I know," she whispers back. She decides not to teach Elsa the word "idiot" just yet – it might not go over well with whatever lily-white, religious – perhaps she needs to reevaluate her stereotypes of foster parents, she realizes upon further reflection, but that's a problem for another day – family might end up adopting her.

Although she *does* already know "shit."

"Well, if his skin wasn't one of those colors, then what did it look like?"

Elsa rolls her eyes. "The same as mine, but wrinkly."

"Wrinkly?" Robin murmurs, jotting down "white" and "old" on his notepad. "And how about his hair?"

There's silence again as Elsa chews at her lower lip and resumes clinging. "Not really a yes or no question," Regina comments, turning her head to nuzzle the little girl as she sinks deeper into her shoulder, wondering at small children's strange ability to turn their bodies into formless liquid while cuddling. "Let's start with: did he have hair?"

Elsa shrugs her shoulders in a manner vaguely reminiscent of Emma. "Did his hair look a little like Archie's?" Robin suggests. "Like, only a little hair?" She turns to study the moderately embarrassed shrink before nodding tentatively.

"Okay, good," says Robin, voice full of encouragement.

"Almost no hair," Elsa whispers.

"Wow, he must have been really old. The hair he did have – was it gray?"

"White."

"Hmm, practically a dinosaur," the lieutenant remarks, but no giggle is forthcoming. "He must have been pretty strong for an old guy, though." Elsa whimpers, and Regina's embrace tightens as she shakes her head warningly.

"Robin..."

He looks like he's about to say something in reply, but they're interrupted by another tiny cry. "W'gina, I don't want to talk anymore,"

Elsa mumbles, her voice small and inching towards tearful.

"Okay, baby, you don't have to," she coos. "You did a really, really good job."

"Yeah," Robin agrees, clearing his throat and motioning for Archie to stand up, "thanks so much for telling us what this bad guy looks like. It'll be much easier to catch him now."

"And then," Regina promises, "we're going to put him in jail so he can't hurt anyone else, ever again."

Regina adjusts her grip so she can give her departing colleagues a brief wave, which immediately spurs Elsa into a frenzy, screaming and sobbing as loudly as last night.

"W'gina, don't go!" she cries, tightening her hold on the detective's neck so much that Regina has the sensation she's being strangled. "W'gina, stay!"

"Okay, sweetheart, I'll stay," she rasps, tugging the little girl's arms just loose enough so she can draw a breath. "I'll stay, but you have to let me breathe."

"Don't go!" Elsa wails.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby. Look," she says, leaning back against the hospital's joke of a pillow as Robin flashes her a sad smile on his way out, "I'm going back to sleep. Here. With you."

The knowledge that Regina's not going anywhere finally sinks in and seems to have at least a slight calming effect, and Elsa sticks her thumb in her mouth, still crying but no longer screaming, and mumbles, "My W'gina."

"Yes – your Regina," the detective sighs. At least until Children's Services gets here.

But she can't deal with that thought right now, for either of their sakes, so she wipes Elsa's tears with her sleeve and starts singing a lullaby she vaguely remembers from her childhood until the girl, who's still exhausted on top of everything else, finally drifts back to sleep.

xx

"Regina with you guys?" Emma asks as Locksley and a balding guy with glasses who must be Dr. Hopper enter the squad room. It's strange she's never met the department shrink before, given how much time everyone else seems to have spent with him. Maybe she should, she thinks wryly.

Locksley shakes his head, looking equally amused and perplexed. "She's, um...occupied with other matters. Which, to be honest," he adds with a small sigh, "may be a more healthy and productive use for her at this point."

They're alone in the room, with Nolan still hospitalized, Jones finally on break, and Booth and Humbert at the scene, so Emma feels safe nodding along. "Elsa wouldn't let her go, huh?"

"They seem to have formed an incredibly strong bond in a very short time," Hopper observes, "and I think having an adult she can trust will help Elsa in her healing process."

"Yeah, until they yank her out of Regina's arms and throw her in some crappy foster home," Emma mutters, shaking her head darkly. That, if anything, will probably make it all worse. She wishes – well, not much point in making wishes that are about ninety-nine percent unlikely to ever come true.

But there was something about the two of them together that just looked so *right* that she can't help the lump that's rising in her throat at the thought of such a beautiful bond being destroyed before it even has a chance to fully blossom.

Locksley sighs and nods, agreeing with her. "We do what we can," he says tiredly. "But we can rarely do all that we should." He gazes off into the distance for a moment, seemingly lost inside his own thoughts –

sometimes Emma thinks her job and even her life would be a lot easier if she could get lost in there with him – before snapping himself out of it and asking, "Any updates on the case?" just as Hopper makes his exit.

"Glad you asked. We found shoeprints in the mud outside the exit the shooter used – men's size eleven work boots, which aren't particularly unique, but...well, it's something."

"And the gun?"

"The gun's a Glock 22 – pretty old one, and not police issue. Prints are still processing, and the serial number's partially filed off, but the partial and description actually match with a gun stolen from a cop about eighteen years ago. Filed off the number but not the owner's initials – idiots."

"From a cop?"

"Yeah, Detective Lance Levison from the drug unit," Emma reports as Locksley's face lights up in recognition. "His personal gun – it was stolen from the safe in his house, presumably while he was on assignment. You know him?"

"My wife worked drugs," he explains. "Leviathan's a legend – *huge* black guy. They call him Leviathan because he's, you know, *giant*."

"I figured size had something to do with it."

"Really nice guy," Locksley continues. "Marian really looked up to him – he was actually on the short list of candidates to be Roland's godfather."

Why is he telling her this? Locksley is too young to spend as much time as he does on trips down memory lane.

His eyes narrow as he finally gets to the point: "He'd certainly never be involved with harming a child."

"He's not – I mean, just his gun is. And that only harmed Nolan, not any kids," Emma tries to joke.

"Right. And if our three-year-old witness is to be believed, we're looking for an old, balding white guy."

"With size eleven feet," Emma adds, "which I'm guessing someone called 'Leviathan' doesn't have."

Locksley shakes his head, eyebrows practically at his hairline. "Nope – the guy's feet were about the length of my calves, if I remember correctly."

"Right. So, anyway, that's a dead end, since the thief was never caught or anything like that. But at least we can tell the guy we found his gun."

"I'm sure he's been waiting with bated breath."

The door swings open just then; Officer Fa enters breathlessly, manila folder in hand. "Got them to rush the prints, Emma, but it's another dead end," she pants before abruptly halting and standing at attention. "Lieutenant, hello."

"Good morning, Officer," he says with a friendly nod, eyes soft.

Odd, Emma thinks, before informing him, "I kind of roped her into doing some of my dirty work since I was here by myself. Hope that's acceptable."

He shrugs. "Whatever you need to do to solve the case – as long as it's alright with you," he clarifies, grinning sheepishly at Fa.

"It's for the Arendts," she explains.

"Well, there are some perks to doing homicide's grunt work," he says brightly. "I'll put in a good word for you when your name comes up for a

promotion. What happened with the prints?"

"Malinda Black's."

He curses under his breath.

"Well, given her current state, she's obviously not the one who shot Nolan last night. Were there *any* other prints, even unidentified ones?"

Fa shakes her head. "Another dead end."

"Well, we'll talk to Leviathan," Emma sighs, struggling to remain positive. "Maybe he'll have some insight into his gun's disappearance – not that adding an eighteen-year-old cold case into the mix is going to help anything."

"Leviathan?" Mulan asks, surprised. "How's he involved in this?"

"You know him, too?"

"You don't? He's a legend."

"Well, legend or not, he's not involved – that we know of. His gun is, though: but it was stolen from him eighteen years ago, and the case went unsolved."

The officer rolls her eyes. "I can't even imagine how many times a stolen gun could change hands in eighteen years."

"Yeah, that's..." sighing deeply, Emma buries her face in her hands.

At least the kids are safe, she thinks. As much of a clusterfuck as this case is, it's at least gratifying to know that they no longer have to lose sleep over the fate of the Arendts' daughters.

Or maybe not.

The look on Regina's face when she finally straggles in around eleven isn't entirely promising. From the tears streaked down her cheeks and the way her arms are crossed tightly over her chest like she's trying to hold her heart together, Emma guesses that Elsa's reaction to being forcibly removed from "her W'gina's" arms was less than positive.

And W'gina's doesn't seem to be much better.

"Hey, you alright?" Emma murmurs, instantly standing and reaching out a hand in comfort that Regina unceremoniously shoves aside.

"I'm perfectly fine, Detective Swan," she hisses, storming to the bathroom with her head ducked down.

Tiredly rubbing her eyes, Emma gives the other woman a minute's head start and then follows.

"What part of 'I'm fine' did you not understand?" Regina practically spits at her as she enters, though her red-rimmed eyes aren't doing much to increase the menace of her glower.

"Hard to understand what you say when none of the words are true," Emma points out.

"I'm handling this," Regina growls. "I do not need you to coddle me or treat me like I'm made of glass."

Emma groans. Are they seriously back to this? What the hell happened in the span of three hours that has Regina suddenly shutting her out? "Yeah, just like I didn't need you to 'coddle' me the last time Henry went back to New York."

"The situations are hardly comparable."

"Like hell they're not. Regina, it's okay if you're upset. Look – I get it –"

...Which is probably not something that should ever be said again, Emma reflects as Regina just stares at her with horribly hurt, betrayed, and increasingly murderous eyes. *No, Emma, you don't get it. You get, like, maybe ten percent maximum.*

"Okay, I don't get it, but I can kind of begin to imagine –"

"I'm—fine." Regina takes a deep, rattling breath and says, "Elsa merely had a bit of separation anxiety, and like any decent human would, I empathized with her. Now, will you please stop making assumptions and treating me like *I'm* the orphaned child? I do not need you to take care of me."

But that's why I'm here, Emma thinks sadly. Aloud, however, she only says, "Okay, great, you had some secondhand separation anxiety. You need a hug?"

Regina shudders. "No."

And *that*, perhaps, stings the most of all.

xx

Detective Levison looks confused as Emma leads him to a conference room. "The guy on the phone said they'd found my gun."

"Right – or, we're at least ninety percent sure it's yours. Look familiar?" she asks, showing him the picture. He takes a brief look and nods, still frowning.

"Why am I being interrogated by homicide?"

Emma sighs. "Here's the thing: you're not a suspect or anything, but we found your gun because it was used to shoot a cop in the process of a homicide and kidnapping investigation. We couldn't nab the shooter."

"Oh." His face, previously a warm brown, is suddenly much closer to green. "That's...oh god. Which cop?"

"Nolan – just his leg, though; he'll be okay," Emma reports, and he looks even greener. "And, as I said, we weren't able to get the shooter, and there are no prints, so we were hoping, maybe...I know it's a long shot, since it was eighteen years ago and everything, but if there's anything you remember..."

He shakes his head apologetically. "It should all be in the police report," he says, "but if it didn't help then, I doubt it would help now."

"Yeah. There's not a whole lot."

"At this point, I'm not sure if any of it would help, anyway. It was my first year in the drug unit, I was going U.C., working crazy hours, and one night I went to the safe to get it – was gonna go shooting up in New Hampshire for the weekend – and it was gone. Safe was broken, but we didn't find any prints. It could have been missing for weeks by the time I figured it out, so the trail was long gone."

Nodding along, Emma adds disappointedly, "And it's even more long gone now, if the thief would have even held onto it that long. Well, um...I guess they'll get it back to you when the investigation is over?"

Leviathan shoots a small huff out through his nose, smirking slightly. "Doubtful – and unnecessary. I've got a newer and better model now that I know for sure doesn't have bodies attached to it."

"Always a plus," Emma says drily. "Sorry for wasting your time."

She returns to the squad room disappointed, shaking her head when Mills, Fa, and Locksley all look up expectantly. "Nothing useful," she reports. "I mean, the gun was stolen so long ago, it's not like we could have expected much."

"No," Locksley agrees, "it's always nice to have hope, though."

"Did somebody say hope?" Humbert asks, striding triumphantly through the door. "I may have excellent news." He's wearing rubber gloves and holding a black leather jacket that looks...well, for lack of a better word, old. Not particularly well-kept, either. "Found it in the bushes outside the warehouse, near the shooter's escape route."

Mills rolls her eyes. "An abandoned jacket near an abandoned building? That's hardly excellent news. It could have been left there a month ago, and no one would have noticed."

"Not quite, Your Majesty," he says, looking so satisfied with himself, excited to be one-upping the Evil Queen. "Think back to what's been going on the past couple of nights."

"I've been a bit *preoccupied* the last couple of nights," Regina snaps, causing Emma to snort. She quickly hides it, though, since one of those nights was rather private and the other involved the whole Elsa situation – neither is particularly funny.

"It's been rainy."

"So, you know, if the jacket had been outside, you'd all be treated to the stench of wet leather right now," Booth adds unnecessarily.

"A jacket is a jacket," Locksley says, "and that's a fairly generic one, although I might call it vintage. What about fingerprints? DNA?"

Booth produces a clear evidence bag and smugly reports, "Got a hair caught in one of the inside pockets. Root bulb, too. So, hopefully, DNA."

"Yes, but we're looking for an old man with white hair," Emma points out as she takes a closer look. "And that one is pretty clearly brown."

"I'd say it's dark blond," Regina argues.

"Well, anyway, it's not white, and it's too short to be Malinda Black's."

"You two are really great at killing a mood," Booth complains.

"Take it down to evidence processing and tell them to put a rush on it," Locksley orders. "Perhaps there was a third accomplice that no one ever saw?"

Humbert nods and gives a mock salute before leaving with the evidence in tow, and Emma smugly informs Booth, "She's been giving me mood

killing lessons," flashing Regina a toothy grin that she hopes is reciprocated.

"Never had a better student," the brunette remarks before glancing down to type something on her phone.

Thirty seconds later, Emma feels a buzz in her pocket.

Sorry about the bathroom.

And here's the traditional apology. Their routine is really starting to get all too predictable. With a small smile, she types back, *S'okay.*

No, it's not. I promise I'm trying. I love you.

I love you, too, Emma types. Regina's phone buzzes a few seconds later, and Locksley rolls his eyes at them. "Mills and Swan, is there something you'd like to share with the class?"

"No, of course not, Mr. Locksley," jokes Emma, adopting her best sweet and innocent demeanor (she was never sweet and innocent as a teenager) that makes Regina roll her eyes. "Please don't give us detention."

He heaves a long-suffering sigh and Emma mouths, "You good?" to Regina when his back is finally turned.

Regina reaches across the desks to squeeze her hand, nodding sadly. They're good.

But it doesn't feel like much else is.

xx

"Neal?" Emma questions. She'd returned to the squad room to hear from an irritable Jones, who's not taking very well to working without his partner, that her phone had been buzzing for about the last ten minutes, and seeing *his* name on the screen instantly put her on edge, as if she hadn't been antsy already. "What the hell's going on?"

"Sorry, I know you're working, but –"

"Is Henry okay?" she nearly shouts. Why else would he be calling her at work? At the desk across from her, Regina glances up fearfully, her back ramrod straight. "Is he sick? Did he get hurt at camp? Oh, god, I knew we shouldn't have sent him to –"

"Relax! Henry's fine."

"Then why are you calling?"

"Okay, the thing is...Henry's fine," he repeats, "but there was an outbreak of head lice at his summer camp."

"Head lice?"

"Head lice."

"You mean those gross little bugs that live in your hair and lay eggs there? *Those* head lice?"

"Yeah. Apparently they get spread around pretty quick when kids are all living in the same cabins together."

Emma stares down at the sandwich Regina left on her desk and is suddenly grateful that she hasn't gotten around to eating lunch yet. "Does *Henry* have head lice?"

"No!" Neal exclaims quickly. "Or, at least I don't think so. I checked myself, because the camp sent all the kids home."

"Shit."

"Yeah, they have to scrub and disinfect everything and probably perform some kind of exorcism before they can let anyone back there. I'm gonna keep checking every day for the next week or so, but so far, so good."

"Cool." Emma exhales. "Thanks for the heads up."

"That wasn't the thing, though."

"There's another thing?"

"You free this weekend?"

Emma's pretty sure the grin spreading across her face could light up the entire city on its own – it's surprising that no one else in the squad room seems to notice. "Are you asking what I think you're asking?"

"It depends. Do you think I'm asking you for your help with a large-scale jewelry heist? Because the answer is yes." There's a brief pause.

"Sorry, sometimes I forget you're a cop. Yeah, I think the kid was hoping to pop up and see you, if that's cool."

"That's always cool," Emma says enthusiastically, "but just for future reference, I didn't not laugh at your joke because I'm a cop. It just wasn't funny."

"Noted. I'll try to brush up on my humor before I attempt to do stand-up at Paulie's open mic night."

"Is *that* what you do while Henry and I hang out?"

She can almost hear Neal blushing through the phone. "Maybe," he mutters before awkwardly clearing his throat and saying, "So, speaking of the things we do when Henry's with the other parent, I may have heard a rumor about you."

"What kind of rumor?" she asks, wrinkling her nose in confusion. It's not as if she speaks to most of their mutual friends anymore – how could a rumor about her have reached all the way to New York?

"From Henry," Neal quickly clarifies. "He seems to be under the impression that you might be in the process of wooing a lady."

"Wooing is an interesting choice of terminology, but I'm not denying it."

"I see. And it's going well?"

Emma grins across their joined desks at an increasingly confused-looking Regina and says, "It is." Sure, they've had their difficulties, but it doesn't feel like either of them is ready to throw in the towel just yet, and maybe that's enough.

"And if I were to guess this lucky lady's identity?"

"You know her, but I'm sure Henry's mentioned it already."

"That's awesome!" he exclaims, sounding genuinely happy for her. "Seriously, Regina is...wow. She's the kind of woman you'd feel lucky to breathe the same air with, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. And I'm totally going to tell her you said that."

He's blushing again. "I'm sure she'll be flattered," he says in a tone that's almost impressively smooth given the probable color of his face. "I'm totally *not* going to tell Henry so you can surprise him with the news."

"What news? I sent him a postcard about it."

"Hmm." There's a swish of fabric like he's shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe he didn't get it? Anyway, the suspense is killing him and it's hilarious."

"Well, aren't you father of the year?"

"Don't act like you wouldn't be pissed if I didn't let you tell him yourself."

"Okay, fine. So, I'll see you Friday night at South Station? Or were you planning to drive?"

"Honestly, it depends on whether I find any lice in the kid's hair or not."

Emma has to hold back a gag. "Okay, fine. Fair warning, though: if you find lice and he shows up at my apartment, I'm shaving his head."

"If I haven't done it already," Neal grumbles before hanging up the phone. Emma sighs and shakes her head.

"What was that about?" Regina demands, fingers twitching like she's been holding herself back from interrupting the conversation for quite some time.

"Henry's camp had a lice outbreak," Emma explains with a grimace. "He's clean, though, at least as far as we know."

Regina's face contorts in disgust. "Head lice?"

"Yeah – gross, but there is some good news in there: they sent all the kids home so they can fumigate the place, and Henry wants to come visit."

Regina breaks out in a huge grin that mirrors Emma's. "That's fantastic," she says eagerly before her face drops a bit and she adds, "I'm sure you'll be glad to see him."

"*We'll* be glad to see him," Emma corrects, staring at the other woman in confusion. "You *are* planning to hang out with us, right? I mean, I think that's probably his expectation. He's apparently jumping out of his skin with excitement to find out if we got together or not."

"Right," Regina says quickly and pastes a slightly faltering smile back onto her face. "I just didn't want to assume; you *are* his mother after all. I thought he may want to spend time with only you. Or, you with him," she adds quietly.

Emma shrugs her good shoulder and grunts noncommittally. Strangely, she never minds Regina's presence when she's spending time with

Henry, and he, of course, loves it. "Maybe we'll get *some* one-on-one time," she allows, "but I'm sure he'll want to see you. I mean, I might be his mom, but you're his queen."

That brings the other woman's smile back.

"Besides, you're seriously mistaken if you think I'd ever want to spend a whole weekend without you."

The way her final comment makes Regina absolutely radiant with joy causes the weight that's been settled in Emma's chest since their encounter this morning to lessen slightly. Because Regina *is* trying, and more than that, she really *does* love her. *It's not personal*, she reminds herself, *she's just upset about the whole Elsa situation.*

Which is, truly, understandable, because the Elsa situation is shit.

It must suck for someone so overflowing with maternal instinct to be unable to be anyone's mother.

And if Emma can make it suck even a little less by sharing Henry, well, then that's what she's going to do.

xx

"I looked into Leviathan's service record," Emma says on Thursday morning when Locksley returns from his meeting with the police commissioner, looking about as frazzled as she's ever seen him.

"You did *what*?" the lieutenant demands, aghast, and all of the other detectives are looking strangely at her, too. Emma's palms start to sweat even as she tilts her head to the side in confusion, knowing she did nothing wrong. "We're not investigating him, Swan. You can't just go poking through –"

"Look," Emma interrupts nervously, "I wasn't investigating him, but he'd mentioned that his gun was stolen while he was on an undercover assignment, and while there's no indication that the two were related, I just thought..." God, this is ridiculous. She hadn't realized how sensitive Locksley could get about even the slightest hint of a dig at another cop – or maybe this has to do with his wife. "I just thought, since other people's UC assignments have run into difficulties in the past, it was worth checking out who his targets –"

"Alright, point made. Did you find anything?" Locksley asks with a groan.

"About the targets? No. All in jail for petty drug deals at this point. No connection to Malinda Black or the Arendts. It's possible that one could

have stolen and then sold or lost it, but that's not what I found that interested me. There's sort of a weird coincidence in there."

"A coincidence?"

"Lev's gun was stolen eighteen years ago," Emma explains, "during his first year in the drug unit, when he happened to be partnered with a guy named Albert Spencer."

Regina's head instantly snaps up from her paperwork. "What?" she demands.

Across the room, where he's sitting with his injured leg elevated and a laptop awkwardly balanced on his other knee, Nolan jokes, "Hey, Mills, looked like Lord Asshat shared your love of rookie partners."

"I thought you said he didn't have any nicknames," mutters Emma, unsure whether or not the rookie crack offended her.

"I just made it up," Nolan says with a grin, looking incredibly pleased with himself. "What do you think?"

"I think it's incredibly immature," Regina snaps, although the satisfied smirk on her face seems to say otherwise.

"Leviathan was partnered with Spencer?" asks Locksley. "Poor guy – but I guess at some point it was practically a right of passage."

"And he got his gun stolen," Jones muses, "adding insult to injury. Not sure how the two conditions are related, though."

"I just thought it was an interesting coincidence," Emma mumbles, staring uncomfortably at her desk. Now she wishes she hadn't. "Just...well, you mentioned that this Spencer guy was one of the few people who would have known about the Eva Blanchard thing, and now it turns out that he was partner with the gun's owner at the time it was stolen, and if he's as much of an 'asshat' as you claim..."

Nolan grunts. "I wouldn't be surprised if he'd tried to shoot me – or Regina, for that matter – but I'm not seeing, like...a motive. For any of the other shit."

"And after setting up multiple homicides just to get a shot at us, I doubt he'd miss," Regina adds with a forced laugh.

"Anyway, being partnered with someone is not evidence of gun theft," Locksley points out. "Maybe wait until we get the DNA evidence back?"

Suddenly pretending to be very interested in her pen, Emma says under her breath, "Whale's working on it." Thankfully, Locksley seems to take pity on her and starts grilling Booth about the tire-tread analysis from each crime scene. So far, nothing seems to be matching up, and it's frustrating as hell.

"I hate this case," she whispers, so quietly that not even Regina – who's admittedly a little out of it, since she went to visit the Arendt sisters at their foster home this morning and was apparently surprised that leaving was just as hard the second time – can hear her.

At least tomorrow's Friday, she reminds herself. Henry's coming. Henry is coming and everything is going to be all better, for both of them.

Kind of a lot of pressure to put on one little kid.

But she's not feeling too many other options at this point.

xx

The way that Henry leaps into her arms at the train station is unanticipated but not entirely surprising: for all he pretends that ten-and-three-quarters is too old to be a major mama's boy, he's an affectionate

kid and the distance is hard on both of them. What *is* surprising is that he gives Regina nearly identical treatment when he's dislodged his head from Emma's shoulder enough to see that she's standing beside them.

Though the way her eyes fill with tears before she returns the embrace is nothing if not predictable, Emma thinks wryly. She has to congratulate herself on finally finding a woman who loves her kid as much as she does.

"Your postcard wasn't very clear," he says accusingly, arms still wrapped tightly around Regina's waist. "But you're here together, so does that mean..."

Emma laughs. "Yes, we're together," she confirms.

Henry whoops loudly before guiltily covering his mouth as about half of the people in the immediate vicinity turn to stare.

"Thank god," he says a little more quietly. "I thought you two would never get your shit together."

Regina gives Emma a pointed look, and the younger woman pretends to smack her son across the forehead. "Um, excuse me, I'm the only one allowed to talk like that," she scolds, though she's ninety-percent joking and he obviously knows it, given the way he's grinning. "You should really learn to mind your manners in the presence of a queen."

"As should you, dear," teases Regina. "But what is this I'm hearing about a postcard?"

"She promised to send me a postcard if you two, you know...got together," Henry explains as he swiftly elbows Emma in the ribs. "And she *did* keep her promise for once, but there was only one word on it."

"The word was yes – and with three exclamation points; what more explanation did you need?" Emma demands irritably, rubbing her ribs where Henry's elbow had made contact. They must have done some kind of weight-lifting at that camp, or maybe karate. He's packing much more power than he has in the past.

"Anyway, I'm glad you finally got it done on your own," Henry's saying as Neal finally finds his way out of the train, "or I might've had to take drastic measures."

"*Drastic* measures?" asks Regina. "That sounds intense."

"You know what was intense? Living with you two while you danced around your feelings for each other like a bunch of babies. Intensely annoying."

"Um, okay," Neal chuckles nervously, "there's no need for hostility here."

"Wasn't being hostile," Henry grumbles.

"We're going to need to update our definitions now that you're starting to get hormonal," his dad says, clapping him on the shoulder. "Hey, Em and Regina. Guess the cat's out of the bag?"

"Wasn't in a very tightly sealed bag to begin with," Emma mutters, causing both Neal and Regina to smirk. "What?"

"Nothing, dear." Regina gives Emma's hand a good-natured squeeze and then turns to Henry, asking, "How was camp? Did you get to do a lot of riding?"

"Camp was good," Henry replies, instantly smiling again. "I mean, until the gross head lice part. I went riding every day – I got a lot better, too. I mean, they might have just been telling me that to make me feel good, though. They were really into self-esteem."

"Well, I imagine it would be difficult to practice something every day and not improve at least a little," she reassures him.

"But none of the horses were as nice as Bear." Regina smiles, perhaps a bit sadly, but then he whispers in her ear, "None of them were as mean as Blue, though," and she bursts out laughing.

Emma feels her own lips start to perk up into a grin again, and she slings the arm that isn't connected to Regina's over Henry's shoulder and says, "You hungry, kid? I think you grew two inches in two weeks."

"Always hungry," he confirms.

"You feeling pizza?"

"Pizza's good. Other food is also good – wings, burgers..."

"Maybe something containing vegetables?" Regina suggests hopefully.

Neal chuckles and awkwardly pats her on the arm. "I like you, Regina," he says. "Feel free to spend as much time with the kid as you want. Hell, if you ever get sick of Em, there's space for you in our apartment in New York. No bed bugs, either."

Regina laughs again, leaning into Emma just the slightest bit when she replies, "Thank you for the offer, I always love spending time with Henry. However, I doubt I'll be tiring of Emma anytime soon."

Emma's fist unconsciously clenches and she stares at the floor. *That was a joke*, she reminds herself. Neal is always joking, and Regina's

declaration was only meant to buoy her. Still, the words "doubt" and "anytime soon" don't do much to boost her confidence.

Regina's the kind of woman you'd feel lucky to breathe the same air with.

And Emma is Emma.

xx

Henry is quite a talker – Regina has always known that, but it's never been as clear to her as it is tonight. Sure, he's a great listener, too, especially for a kid his age – much like his mom – but he can also talk like there's no tomorrow, and for that, she's never been more grateful.

Because Emma, strangely, isn't talking. She's nodding along with what Henry's saying, occasionally making some appropriate response, but she's not *talking*. It's not that she isn't engaging with him – she's practically hanging on his every word, so excited to actually have him in her presence again – but the lack of actual statements coming from her mouth is disconcerting.

As for Regina, she hasn't been feeling particularly talkative; this entire week has been such an emotional rollercoaster that she can barely begin to process her thoughts about it. Perhaps Emma feels the same way? The younger woman, she's beginning to realize, is not at all forthcoming about sharing her emotions when she isn't hungover or concussed. She likes to be the strong one, the protective one. It's almost enough to make Regina forget, sometimes, that Emma has her own issues to struggle with that this case is probably not helping.

And then she wants to hang her head in shame, because Emma has spent this entire week caring for her, trying to chase away Regina's demons, when surely this case must be affecting her, too. How could it not? Hurt, orphaned kids, not to mention she's been confined to her desk for most of it – and Regina's been too lost in her own head to notice.

She catches herself staring and quickly looks down at her plate, causing Emma's eyes to flicker over to her in concern. The blonde reaches over to squeeze her hand, but Regina pulls away, hoping her self-disgust isn't written quite as transparently across her face as she fears it is. Emma's eyes are wide for a second before she quickly turns back to Henry, fully attentive.

"I got a lot better at swimming," he's saying. "I got bumped up to Crocodile level just before they closed the camp, but all of the other kids in my cabin were in Shark."

"Well, better than Minnow, right?" Emma asks, laughing lightly.

"Yeah, Minnow's for kids that, like, have never even taken a bath before."

"Good lord," Emma shudders, "I hope you didn't have to share a cabin with them."

"Mom! I didn't mean it like that – come on! I just meant, like, they learned how to blow bubbles and stuff like that."

"I think I've figured out where the head lice came from," Regina jokes, offering Emma a small smile which is hesitantly returned.

"Not you, too," he groans. "I just meant – you know what? Fine. Make fun of me."

"We only tease you because we love you," Emma says sweetly. "And, you know, we also love teasing. Now you know how I felt when you and Regina were ganging up on me about that swan business."

"Oh, did you not like that?"

"Just something to consider for the future," she mumbles, face reddening as both Regina and Henry turn to her with concern.

"We only tease you because we love you," Henry echoes, patting her arm, "but we'll stop if it really bothers you."

"It doesn't," Emma says quickly. "I was just...hey, why don't you tell us more about those campfire stories. Any scary ones?"

Henry narrows his eyes at her – he's too intelligent to be fooled by abrupt topic changes, and Emma knows it. Still, he gives her the benefit of the doubt and starts telling both of them the tale of the girl with the green ribbon around her neck, and the mood quickly shifts back to normal.

Regina listens raptly, smiling at Henry's eagerness and his ability to draw them both into – if she's being perfectly honest – a fairly boring ghost story that she's known by heart since she was a little girl, but her eyes don't leave Emma's.

There's something going on – of that, she's certain, and she can't shake the feeling that it's somehow her fault.

xx

Regina is still in the living room when Emma returns from tucking Henry in, standing uncomfortably by the door like she's debating whether or not she wants to leave.

"Hey, you want to stay over tonight?" Emma offers, nodding her head toward her bedroom and quirking up one eyebrow.

Regina's lips twitch upward into something resembling a smile, but she shakes her head. "Would that be appropriate? With Henry around?"

Confused, Emma tilts her head to one side and then the other, studying the brunette curiously. It's not like Regina to be reluctant to spend the night together. "Why wouldn't it be?" she asks. "You've slept here before when he was around."

"Well, yes, but we weren't *dating* at that time."

"You wanted to be, though," Emma teases.

"I did."

"I did, too, except I was way too foggy to sort out my feelings."

"Yes, but the fact remains: we weren't dating, and now we are."

"Yeah, but, like...it's not like we're going to have passionate sex tonight. I mean, unless you want to," she adds quickly. "Then we'll just keep our voices down and lock the door. But I just meant, like, sleeping. Actual sleeping."

Regina responds with a tiny, noncommittal grunt that has Emma thoroughly perplexed. "It's your home, your son, your decision."

"I mean, I won't be offended if you say no," Emma backtracks, suddenly wondering if she misread the situation. And she won't be; not too much, anyway. "It's just, you seemed like you didn't want to leave, and with everything going on, I didn't want you to get stuck having nightmares all on your own or something like that."

And *that* was the absolute wrong thing to say.

"Detective Swan," snaps Regina, "you are not my caregiver. I am perfectly capable of sleeping on my own without you pulling this knight in shining armor routine!"

"I know," Emma replies carefully. She reaches out for Regina's hand, but the other woman jerks away from her. Again. *Shit*. "But I *like* being your knight in shining armor."

Because if she's not a knight in shining armor, then who is she, really? Just a single mom rookie detective trying to keep her head above water in a relationship with someone pretty damn far out of her league.

Who is now, curiously, on the verge of tears, for reasons she can't quite articulate.

At least that makes Regina's hostility instantly vanish.

"Emma!" she gasps. "What – what did I...I'm so sorry!"

Emma waves her hand and attempts to compose herself. "It's fine," she mutters in between harsh sniffles. "Don't worry about it."

"Emma, I didn't mean to snap at you. I – oh, god." Now Regina's crying, too, and neither of them have any idea what's going on. "I'm sorry, Emma," she whimpers, wringing her hands together and trying to hide the fact that every one of her limbs is trembling. "Emma, I'm so sorry. I don't know what I did –"

"I said it's fine!" Emma barks, and then she slaps a hand over her mouth because this will definitely wake Henry if they're not careful, and she's not sure either of them is enough of an adult to deal with that right now. Sinking down onto the sofa, she buries her face in her hands and says, "I was just...clearly, you don't like being smothered. Lesson learned. And unlearned. And learned again."

"Oh, Emma," Regina whispers through her tears as she kneels down in front of the younger woman and tentatively places a hand on her upper arm. "I...I shouldn't have snapped at you. I never – *please* believe me that I never meant to hurt you, and you're not smothering me. You did nothing wrong."

Emma shakes her head dolefully. "I was smothering you. I shouldn't have brought up your nightmares," she admits. Regina's snapped at her before, for much less legitimate reasons, and it hasn't brought on this kind of reaction. "I...I know I'm not your caregiver. I just – I love you. I want to be the one who takes care of you."

"I know. And that's...that's very kind of you. But I don't – I *shouldn't* – need you to."

Emma chances a glance up from her now soaked palms, staring into Regina's soulful, glistening eyes with a desperate plea. "But if you don't need me to take care of you," she whispers, "then why do you need me?"

"Pardon?"

Exhaling and shaking her head, Emma says, "Regina, you're – I mean, minus the whole snapping-at-me thing, you're the most phenomenal person who's ever even *looked* at me, and I just...I want you to not need me, too, okay? I want you to feel safe and confident and be happy and healthy all on your own, because I know that's what you want and – and I love you." Regina nods, patting Emma's arm like she's waiting for

more. She takes a shaky breath and continues, "But at the same time, I – god, I don't even know how to say this in a way that doesn't sound terrible. Like, I want you to need me, you know? I want to be the one who holds you when you're sad and makes you feel safe, and if you don't need me, then why would you stick around?"

"Emma," Regina breathes, tenderly brushing some stray curls aside so she can caress her partner's cheek. "I *do* need you."

"But you don't want to! And you're right – you shouldn't. And I want that for you, but you're the only person who's ever looked at me like that, Regina: like I mean something to you, and just...what will I be to you if I'm not your knight in shining armor?"

Regina looks flabbergasted, and after a moment of wordlessly moving her mouth as her eyes blink rapidly in confusion, she exclaims, "You'll be *you*, of course."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Emma, look at me," Regina orders. Reluctantly, Emma obeys. "Look in my eyes and tell me what you see."

Light. Love. Regina's eyes are bright, even in the darkened room, gleaming with tears and a softness with which no one, perhaps not even Regina herself, has ever looked at Emma before. She immediately stares back down at her lap, embarrassed.

"Emma, do I need you to take care of me at this exact second?"

"N-no," Emma admits.

"But am I still looking at you like you mean something to me?"

"You..."

Yes, it would appear that way. The overwhelming amount of pure love shining through Regina's eyes, the inward lean of her shoulders, and the tenderness of her touch speak volumes, but Emma can scarcely allow herself to believe it.

Regina traces her finger along the line of Emma's jaw, gently tilting her chin upwards and gazing directly into her eyes. "Emma, I love the way you take care of me, even though I know I'm terrible at showing it." She punctuates the declaration with a soft chuckle and a gentle, chaste kiss. "And I love the way you make me feel safe-" another kiss "-and confident-" another "-and sexy, not to mention heroic." The kisses are getting harder, deeper, longer, and Emma moans in between tiny sobs, in spite of herself. "But none of those things are the reason why I love *you*."

Lips throbbing and aching for more, even as she hates herself for appearing so desperate, Emma leans in closer to Regina and rasps,

"Why, then? Why do you love me?"

Regina gives her a watery smile and another kiss. "I love you because you're *you*," she explains simply. "I love you because you light up my life just by existing. I loved you when you were making paper snowballs at your desk; I loved you when you were limping along behind me on the running trail; I loved you when you were crying in the bathroom; I loved you before I even remembered what love was, and then I loved you because you made me remember."

"But-"

"No buts. Emma, you're the one who told me that love isn't about what you deserve, and although that may be true, you deserve it. You deserve every ounce of love that I could possibly give you, but that doesn't matter because it's already yours."

"But someday-"

"I don't want to think about someday," Regina interrupts. She leans in closer to Emma and swallows hard, resting their foreheads together and joining their trembling hands. When she speaks, there's a small waver in her voice, but her gaze is strong and determined. "Yes, there's a possibility that this could all change. We can't promise each other forever. All I know, Emma, is that right now, I could not imagine loving someone more. It's been a long time since I've allowed myself the possibility of a future, but when I'm with you, I can begin to feel it

again. And I know that whatever future exists, I want us to be together for it. I want to stick around for you."

Regina's name comes off of Emma's lips in a breathy whimper that's immediately silenced by one final kiss, by lips and tongue and teeth that are both hard and soft, desperate and composed, wholly giving and wholly receiving, and Emma sighs contentedly and melts into Regina until they're both collapsed on the floor, unwilling to separate from each other's warmth for long enough to move.

Henry's kind enough – or freaked out enough – not to say anything when he finds them on Saturday morning in the same position, parted lips still lightly touching as they sleepily inhale and exhale the essence of proof that the other is still present.

Or maybe not.

"Okay, when you two are done sleep-kissing, can we make waffles?" he hollers from the kitchen.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Sorry times a million for the long wait for this chapter. I'm traveling at the moment, and life is pretty hectic. (If you want to know what I'm doing when I'm not writing, feel free to follow me on tumblr - into-themists.) Thank you all so much for your continued support and patience.
>
> TW for discussions of rape and murder. The usual.

"Okay, when you two are done sleep-kissing, can we make waffles?"

Grunting, Emma sleepily rubs one eye and pokes the dozing woman still tangled up in her arms. "Hey, the kid thinks it's morning," she mumbles, her voice still thick and cottony with sleep

Regina chuckles lightly and closes the miniscule distance between their lips. "What a way to wake up – I tried to warn you about scarring him for life," she jokes, before quickly sobering and asking, "Are you okay? Last night was –"

"Last night was last night," Emma says decisively. "Let's just put it behind us."

"Emma..."

Regina exhales, melting further into the blonde's tight – almost desperate – embrace. "You can't insist on taking care of me without allowing me to do the same for you."

With a happy sigh, Emma nuzzles Regina's neck, reveling in the protectiveness of the other woman's touch, the strange sensation in her body that she's only ever experienced with Regina: this feeling that she's appreciated and cared for and loved unconditionally.

It's a feeling that she'd never *truly* doubted, but there's a warmth inside of her, a calm satisfaction at having it confirmed that whatever shit Regina's struggling with, it has nothing to do with her.

And there's always going to be shit. She's not under any illusion that Regina's PTSD or her own insecurities could possibly go away overnight, but maybe they're strong enough to get through it together.

This morning, it certainly feels that way.

"I'm good," she reassures Regina, glancing toward the kitchen with no actual intention of getting up. The hardwood floor isn't particularly comfortable, but she'd stay there forever if it meant she could keep

Regina's arms around her. "What you said last night about the future – did you mean it?"

"Yes," Regina says softly, eyes bright and pained, "with all of my heart. I'm sorry I ever made you feel otherwise."

"You didn't," Emma lies before seeing the other woman's dubious glare and quickly amending, "not much, anyway. I mean, I'm just sensitive about the whole idea of...you know."

"I know." Unconsciously running a finger along Emma's cheekbone, she whispers, "I love you, Emma. I love you, and I'm trying to do better. I just...I don't know how to love very well. I think I show it in all the wrong ways."

"I think you show it just fine," Emma disagrees. "You might need a little work on accepting it, though."

Regina smiles sadly. "I think I hear the pot calling the kettle black."

"That's us – off-color cooking utensils," Emma jokes, playfully kissing Regina on the nose. "But seriously, I've got stuff to work on; you've got stuff to work on – we're a work-in-progress. If everything was perfect and effortless, would the relationship even be worth it?"

Looking like she's not sure whether to be offended by the statement, Regina purses her lips and, after a long silence, finally pronounces,

"That's an interesting attitude."

"You know what I mean," Emma groans. "And you keep changing the subject. The point is, you love me. You trust me – you trusted me enough to touch your scar. You're allowed to tell me when you're hurting."

She expects deflection, excuses – but there's nothing.

"I know."

"So, tell me. Let's start now."

"Henry's hung--"

"Henry can wait five minutes; or, if he can't, he knows where to find the cereal."

"I don't want to take time away from your weekend with him. If he wants –"

"Regina!"

The older woman draws in a deep breath, waits, and then exhales slowly. "The girls – Elsa and Anna. I don't want them stuck in some...crappy foster home," she finally admits. "I want to be their crappy foster home – although I'd try not to be...crappy."

"I want that for you, too," Emma agrees. "And for them. I think – are you sure there's no way it could happen?"

Eyes filled with despair, Regina quickly shakes her head. "I wouldn't say there's *no* way it could happen, but...well, there's no way that I can think of."

"We'll keep thinking, then," Emma says determinedly. "Because I don't want them in a crappy foster home, either. Those girls have gone through too much crappiness already."

"Emma. there's...there's a chance they could find a perfectly nice family. They could get adopted very quickly; when I visited, the case worker said –"

"Yeah, they could find a nice family for them, but that family wouldn't be *you*."

"Can we just drop this?" Regina demands. "I...I just...it's not going to happen. But if the girls find a home, where they're happy, then...then that's all I need to know. It's not worth talking about my feelings – unless

you want to talk about yours," she quickly amends. "I'm here; I can listen."

"Nah, I'm alright – plus, I'm pretty sure a hungry kid's going to show up here in three, two –"

"Mom!" Henry whines. "Please?"

"Henry, I love the crap out of you, but it's *way* too early for this. If you're gonna get up before six, the least you could do is make your old mom breakfast in bed, huh? Good idea or great idea?"

"You're not old."

"Right, but Regina's old. Why don't you make *her* breakfast in bed?"

"Excuse me?" Regina asks menacingly – well, as menacingly as she can. It's a bit hard to scare someone when your eyes are still half-shut and you're wrapped around their body like a koala.

"Regina's not *that* old," says Henry, earning him a toothy Evil Queen grin, "and it'd be hard to make either of you breakfast in bed when you're not, you know...in bed. Why are you sleeping on the floor?"

Regina looks around bewilderedly at their surroundings and tries to stretch the kinks out of her back. "Good question," she mutters.

"Pretty sure you pulled me onto it," says Emma. "Or, like, I slid down or something."

"Did *not* need to know that!" Henry exclaims.

"Ew, kid, not like that. There was no funny business here last night – scout's honor."

"You're not a scout."

"Detective's honor, then."

"Is that even a thing?"

"Someone said something about waffles," Regina reminds them, suddenly finding the energy to push herself off the floor, "which sounds like a great idea. I could also use a cup of coffee, or several."

Emma grunts and laboriously shifts to a sitting position. "I'll get the coffee, you get the waffles?" she offers. "Yours are probably better than

mine."

"Your waffles are fine," Henry says charitably. "It's not too hard to pour batter into a waffle iron."

"But?"

"But, yeah, Regina's are better."

"Wipe that smirk off, or you're not getting any coffee," Emma grumbles, and her partner tries valiantly to keep a straight face. "This isn't Iron Chef – your cooking skills are impressive but ultimately meaningless."

Henry rolls his eyes. "I'll be in the kitchen when you two figure out...whatever this is."

As he retreats, still shaking his head exasperatedly, Regina reaches out a hand to help Emma up.

"You're sure you're okay?" she demands. "Seeing kids in a bad situation has never been easy for you, and I would think –"

"I'm fine," Emma interrupts. It's not a lie – not really. She isn't *fine*, exactly, but she's clearly doing better with the situation than Regina is. "I mean, yeah, it sucks, but...they're safe, you know?" she says encouragingly, finally finding the words after a long effort. "They have a chance of finding a good home, even...even if it's not with you. They both seem like strong kids. I think – I *hope* – they'll be okay."

Regina nods, lips pressed tightly together as she grips Emma's forearm. Maybe she's trying to offer comfort, or perhaps her hold on the blonde's arm is somehow grounding her: either way, the closeness has a calming effect on both of them.

"They'll be okay," Regina repeats softly, as if saying the words out loud will help her believe them.

"We'll make sure they are. We'll find a way."

And, Emma thinks privately, *we'll find a way for them to live with Regina.* She's not quite sure how that's going to happen, but she's determined to figure it out. Despite all the issues, she's still pretty sure Regina would be a better parent than ninety-nine percent of the ones she'd had in her childhood.

And there was something about seeing her with Elsa on her lap that had just looked so *right*.

"What are you thinking about?" Regina asks curiously, lightly nudging Emma's shoulder as she realizes with a start that she's been staring silently into space for quite some time now.

"Nothing – just breakfast," she replies. Regina's eyes narrow and she starts to open her mouth, but then both of their stomachs growl, and then they're laughing and Regina's holding her hand and leading her into the kitchen, suspicion completely forgotten.

Henry's already standing at the counter, ingredients laid out in front of him as the waffle iron warms up. "Took you long enough," he grumbles, "I'm starving."

xx

"Oh!" Henry exclaims suddenly, just as Regina sets the heaping platter of waffles on the kitchen table. "I have something for you!"

He rushes off to his room, leaving the two women to stare at each other in confusion. "Which one of us was that directed at?" Emma wonders aloud, pouring two mugs of coffee and one of cocoa.

"Regina!" he says breathlessly, racing back into the kitchen to drop a flat, hand-wrapped package on the table in front of the brunette.

"Is this part two of your book?" Emma inquires. "I was wondering when that was going to come out."

"I couldn't write the ending until last night. Open it!"

Regina laughs, running one finger delicately along the side of the gift. "Alright. Should we all read it together?"

"Yeah, Mom can stay."

"Nothing offensive in here this time?" Emma chuckles, leaning over Regina's shoulder as she settles down into a chair and carefully peels away the wrapping paper. "Nothing about the swan?"

"Well, it is about the swan," Henry mumbles, suddenly embarrassed. "But it's not offensive – or it shouldn't be, anyway."

Henry sits at the table next to her, and Regina checks to see if both mother and son are ready before opening to the first page.

One day, Queen Regina brought the swan along on her secret mission, a move that would prove life-changing for the both of them when the mission suddenly took a turn for the worse. Although the swan was often dimwitted, she was also valiant. When she saw that the queen was in danger, the swan immediately rushed to her side, pushing her out of the bullet's path just in the nick of time.

"This is startlingly accurate," Regina remarks, slightly sick to her stomach at the still-vivid memory the illustration recalls. Aside from Emma's species change and her own regal dress, the shooting is depicted exactly as she remembers it.

Emma squeezes her shoulder and offers, "He saw the news," as an explanation.

"Keep reading!" Henry commands.

But the bullet clipped the swan's wing, causing the majestic beast to fall to the ground. As the queen knelt over her beloved pet's body, she cried out in despair, realizing the depth of the creature's devotion to her – and, as it turns out, her own devotion to the swan. She had become more than just a pet: to both the queen and prince, the swan was a family member and a true friend, and to lose her would cause their worlds and hearts to blacken.

"Geez, kid, melodramatic much?" Emma asks lightly, though the increasing tightness of her grip on Regina's shoulder betrays her. Regina herself feels her hands start to tremble, and it takes a nudge from Henry

to force her to turn the page away from a child's cartoon drawing that hurts much more than it probably should.

"Sorry," he says awkwardly. "I had to get out the thesaurus for that one. But don't worry – it's based on real life, so it has a happy ending. Keep reading."

The queen and prince watched over the swan as she healed, solemnly waiting for a sign that their pet would be okay. There were many long nights filled with worry, but the swan slowly began to return to herself, much to the queen and prince's joy. But then, something strange happened. As she got healthier, the swan started to show more humanlike qualities, and a closer and closer relationship began to develop between her and the queen.

Emma looks uneasy. "Um, kid? You're not going to write –"

"It's a fairytale!" Henry exclaims.

As they spent more time together, the swan became more educated in the ways of humans, and Queen Regina began to learn the language of swans. Slowly but surely, they began falling in love. Or maybe, they were simply beginning to realize that they had been in love the whole time.

Regina briefly wonders if Henry has mind-reading abilities

Finally, after many nights of fear and confusion, the swan and the queen were courageous enough to tell each other about their love. So relieved to be freed of her burden of secrecy, Queen Regina lifted the swan up and –

"Kid! This is gonna get gross!" Emma protests.

"After what I saw this morning, *you're* not allowed to complain about gross ever again," grumbles Henry. "Keep reading."

Queen Regina lifted the swan up and kissed her. And in that moment, the power of their true love surrounded both of them with a bright glow unlike any that had ever been seen before, and before her very eyes, the queen saw the swan transform into a beautiful princess.

"How strange," Regina jokes, wiping away a few tears, "this princess looks astonishingly like your mother."

"Not so sure how I feel about this dress design, though," says Emma. "I mean, the queen's is much prettier."

Henry gives both of them a once-over and, rolling his eyes, asks his mother, "Have you looked at your clothes compared to Regina's lately?"

Emma bites her lower lip and feigns hurt, but Regina is relieved to see that she's actually grinning. "Fair enough," she mutters.

The prince was shocked to see his former pet's new form, but from that moment on, he became a true believer in love's ability to change lives. The three of them decided to live together as a family for the rest of their lives, and their future was filled with love and adventure.

To Be Continued...

There's a moment when nobody speaks, and Regina, who's staring straight ahead and trying to figure out whether she's about to start sobbing, feels Henry fidget beside her.

"I – um...I hope you liked it," he murmurs. "Both of you." And then he starts to stand up, perhaps ready to flee, when Emma engulfs him in something halfway between a bear-hug and a headlock.

"That was definitely a fairytale for the ages, kid," she says, voice gruff and – Regina is surprised to note when she finally manages to look up – eyes a bit teary.

"Mom, you're embarrassing me," Henry complains.

"How? The only person here is Regina," Emma challenges him, "and she's not judging. In fact, I bet she wants in on this."

Henry, struggling slightly to turn his head, asks, "Do you?" Before Regina can answer, both mother and son have pulled her into the middle of a group hug so tight her lungs can barely expand, but there's something about their embrace that helps her breathe easier in spite of it.

Henry had called them a family.

Well, to be fair, he had called their fictional counterparts a family, but it still means something.

Doesn't it?

There's a part of her – a small part, and getting smaller, but it's still there – that's saying this relationship is moving too quickly. That there are still too many mountains to be moved before they can even begin thinking about "family."

Henry's ten. He still sees the world in black and white and believes in fairytale happy endings. Regina knows better; Emma knows better.

But Emma's got her fingers tangled in Regina's uncombed hair and she's saying, "We make a pretty kickass family, if I do say so myself," and Regina feels her heart start to pound in her chest because if *Emma* says it, then –

Suddenly realizing that both Swans are staring expectantly at her, Regina forces herself out of an increasingly hysterical spiral and nods. "Very kickass," she agrees.

The moment is getting too emotional too fast, but thankfully, Henry seems to realize it just seconds after Regina does.

"Not as kickass as waffles," he says, nudging his chin against Emma's elbow to loosen her grip, "which are getting cold."

Emma clears her throat and grudgingly lets go. "You're right, kid. Let's eat."

They're five minutes to stuffing their faces when Emma's cell phone rings.

"It's Locksley," she sighs, obviously irritated. "What the hell? I'm not on call this weekend. Do you think he just wants to shoot the breeze on Saturday morning? Or maybe threaten me again?"

Confused, Regina cocks her head to one side and asks, "He threatened you?"

"Don't worry about it," Emma says with a groan before unenthusiastically answering the call. "Lieutenant? What's going on?"

As the blonde's expression shifts from annoyance to concern, Regina's heart sinks. And when Emma's eyes meet hers and she replies, "Yes, she is," to one of Locksley's questions, she starts to wish they were still cuddled on the living room floor, shutting out the world for a few more blissful hours. Because this is obviously about the case, and she's guessing it's not good.

Actually, judging purely by the grim set of Emma's jaw, "not good" is probably a charitable way to describe it.

Regina and Henry wait with bated breath as Emma puts the phone down and turns back to them, her fingers tugging anxiously at the tangles in her hair as she sighs heavily. "We need to head to the station, ASAP," she tells Regina.

"They found a DNA match for the hair in the jacket?" the senior detective guesses.

"Yeah, apparently. And I guess it's – well, I mean, he's calling everyone in for a meeting, so...yeah."

"It's not good," Regina pronounces as she tiredly pushes herself up from the table.

Henry, who'd been silent the entire time, suddenly pipes up, "What about me?"

Emma sighs. "Well, it turns out that Locksley has a kid, too. Maybe he's about your age –"

"He's four," Regina corrects, mouth moving on instinct before she realizes that particular piece of information was probably far from helpful.

"Anyway," Emma says loudly, fixing Regina with a hardened expression that mercifully doesn't seem *too* upset, "you two are going to hang out for a few hours until we're done. Maybe you could bring a book?"

Henry groans and pouts, arms crossed over his chest as he leans back in his chair. "I could stay home and read," he suggests. "By myself."

"Not a chance. Come on, kid; let's get going. I don't like it any more than you do."

He still seems reluctant, so Regina offers, "If you're nice to Roland and don't give your mom a hard time, maybe we can make our famous lasagna tonight."

That makes him perk up. "With no vegetables?" he asks.

Regina smirks and carefully avoids Emma's eyes. "A few vegetables."

"Ice cream and video games after? All three of us?"

"I think that can be arranged," Emma chuckles. playfully ruffling his hair. "Now let's get dressed and get this over with."

Henry slowly rises, still rolling his eyes, but he's considerably less grumpy than before. (And, Regina notes with as much amusement as she can muster, given the circumstances, he's definitely less grumpy than his mother.)

"Thanks," Emma whispers to Regina once Henry's out of the room.

"Don't thank me yet."

xx

The detectives and ADA Blanchard are all gathered around Locksley and Dr. Whale in the squad room when Emma and Regina arrive with a book-laden Henry a couple of steps behind. They're solemn and tense, and Emma has an uneasy twinge in the pit of her stomach that she can't quite explain.

"You can hang out in there," Locksley tells Henry, gesturing to his office where Roland is already seated at the desk, coloring with laser-like focus. "Hopefully, you brought something to do, but I'll try to give your mom back as soon as possible. I have a number of books in there, but nothing appropriate for your age."

Henry shrugs, gives Emma a quick hug, and ambles into the lieutenant's office like it's no hardship for him, though Emma still feels pretty guilty about ruining their "family Saturday." Roland looks up eagerly from the coloring book, seemingly shocked to have a playmate.

Once the door is closed, Whale begins talking. "We got a hit on the DNA from the jacket – two hits, actually."

"Two hits? How is that possible?" asks Jones.

"Contaminated evidence," Regina suggests. "Or possibly identical twins."

Locksley nods. "It appears to be a case of the latter," he says tiredly, "but we still have a problem."

The Medical Examiner holds up two photographs. The first is a young man dressed in an army uniform, looking serious with his closely cropped hair. The second, however, is someone they all recognize.

"Detective Nolan?" Emma breathes. Perturbed, the detective rises from his chair in the corner and hobbles over to take a closer look at the pictures.

"David Nolan and deceased Corporal James Spencer," Whale reads. "Both adopted by different families – same birthdates. The DNA profiles were identical. So it's looking like –"

"Identical twins," Nolan murmurs, staring at the other man's photo, "separated at birth. I never knew..."

Emma wonders if it's possible for her jaw to hit the floor. "Did you know you were adopted?" she demands.

He shrugs. "I did – I found out when I was sixteen or so, but I never knew...I never knew I had a sibling, you know? I tried to find my birth parents when I was in college, but all of the records were sealed. Court order. Even the attorney wouldn't tell me anything."

"Who was the attorney?" Mary Margaret asks, chewing on her pen. "If it's relevant to the case, maybe we can –"

"Judge Gold," he says shortly. "He was an adoption attorney and a family court judge before he switched gears. And I doubt it's relevant."

Jones raises his eyebrows. "The guy gets around," he mutters.

"Hold on, though," Regina cuts in, "this James Spencer - you said he was...deceased?"

"He died in Iraq in 2006," Locksley informs them. "So, that rules him out as a suspect."

"Sorry," Emma mutters to Nolan, who shrugs again like he hadn't even heard. She imagines there's not much room for anything else when your brain suddenly has to process the fact that you have a long-lost sibling.

"So, did Detective Nolan contaminate the evidence?" asks Regina. "Or is there a good reason you called us all in on a Saturday?"

Jones immediately jumps to defend his partner. "How could Nolan have contaminated the jacket? He never even came into contact with it! The two of you didn't go through that exit, and he had no interaction with the shooter, so –"

"There's something else," Locksley says, "Something that...well, the evidence is still all circumstantial at this point, but when you have enough circumstantial evidence, you eventually come to a point where you can no longer ignore it."

"What do you mean?"

Suddenly, Emma gasps as it comes to her all in a rush. "Wait a minute!" she exclaims. "James *Spencer?* He – he's not..."

"Albert Spencer's son," Locksley confirms with a grim nod. "Yes, yes he is."

"Fuck," Regina mutters, sinking down into her chair with a thud. "How could I have forgotten about Spencer's son?" Jones inhales sharply and Blanchard looks like she's about to cry.

Nolan is still holding his brother's photograph, lost in his own little world. "He said on my first day that I looked a lot like his son who died

in the war," he's murmuring to himself. "But I never thought...wow. Maybe that's why he hated me so much."

"I think he hated you because he's a hateful human being," Regina says, trying feebly to comfort him, though he obviously isn't listening. Still, something in their relationship must have changed while Emma was on leave, because even the small effort is more than she ever would have made for him before.

Emma shakes her head – she'll worry about all of this later – and turns back to the lieutenant. "So, are you saying that Albert Spencer is now our suspect?" She's the only one who doesn't know him personally, so she can't quite understand the atmosphere of dread that's settled in the room, but still, he's a cop.

Well, he *was* a cop.

Who's now being accused of multiple murders.

"I'm saying that I think we need to talk to him. I don't...I have no idea what his motive could be, but I do know that we've now had three separate pieces of evidence that somehow connect to him, and I'm running out of alternative explanations."

"It's about the tapes," Regina says suddenly, causing Blanchard to look up sharply. "I has to be about the tapes."

"Regina –"

"We can't go in and start asking him questions without something more solid!" she exclaims. "If it's him – and it *must* be him – then he's going to be about five steps ahead of us the whole time. We can't let him know we're onto him."

"We'll find a connection between Spencer and Malinda Black," Jones suggests. "There has to be one. The little girl said that both a man and a woman attacked her parents, right? And then faking her death – or killing her sister..."

"It does seem personal," Locksley sighs. "Unfortunately, Malinda Black herself is still comatose; however, we do have another eyewitness –"

"No," interrupts Regina.

"Regina!"

"It's too soon," she argues desperately. "We can't do that to her; she's still – I don't want to – she's three years old! Hasn't she been through enough already? I don't –"

"But if we can catch the person who did this, won't it only help her?" Emma points out. "Or, you know, if Spencer's not the guy, then looking at a photo of him or something like that wouldn't do her any harm."

"She's right," says Locksley. "Regina, I get it, but we need to solve this case. Jones, I need you to prepare a photo array." He sighs and walks over to Regina's desk, kneeling down beside her chair. "I hate this just as much as you do," he says quietly.

"I doubt that," she grumbles, "but you're right; I need to get over it."

"If there was any other way..."

Regina buries her face in her hands for a moment before finally straightening and clearing her throat. "It will be better for her – for *everyone* – if we can catch whoever did this," she says with a nod at Emma. "But I'm coming with you, and if it's too upsetting for her, we're stopping."

"Wouldn't have gone over there without you," Locksley reassures her as Jones pulls a page full of photos off the printer and hands it to him. He turns to the other detectives and says awkwardly, "We'll...um, we'll be back soon. Roland is –"

"We've got it covered," Emma confirms. She peeks through the office window and sees Henry handing some sketches to the younger boy, who looks eager to start coloring them. "I see dragons – they'll probably be

busy for a while, and we've all got your number. Go." Poking her head in the door, she whispers, "Hey, kid, are you guys good in here?"

Henry nods – he doesn't look entirely enthused to be spending his Saturday with a four-year-old, but he's being a good enough sport about it. Maybe she'll buy him a double-scoop tonight – or even a whole sundae all to himself. Roland, on the other hand, is practically jumping out of his skin with excitement. "We're making a book!" he exclaims.

"I can see that," she replies with a laugh. "Looks like a really exciting one – did you know Henry's a world-famous author?"

"Mom!" Henry protests.

Roland's eyes widen. "You are?" he demands, tone disbelieving and reverent.

"Not yet," the older boy mutters.

"Roland!" Locksley calls from outside the door. "I need to run out and talk to someone with Auntie Regina. Henry and Emma are your bosses for the next hour – don't get fired."

Roland nods and clumsily salutes his father. "I gotta get back to work," he says importantly, selecting a red marker to color the dragon's breath.

"He's cute, right?" Emma says under her breath as she nudges Henry with her elbow.

He grunts noncommittally and returns to his sketch. "Should this be the rainbow dragon or the water dragon?" he asks Roland, pointedly ignoring his mother's question.

Roland takes a quick look at the picture and declares, "Rainbow!"

Smirking, Emma shuts the door softly and returns to the squad room. "Two out of three kids are fine," she tells Robin. "Good luck with Elsa."

Regina's standing by the door, arms crossed tightly over her chest as she glares at anyone who dares to make eye contact with her. "This is *not* a good idea," she says to no one in particular, and Emma groans. Hadn't she been on board with the plan just two minutes before? "Her foster mother says her nightmares have been getting worse. If this –"

"But this could help – remember? If we can put away the guy who did it," Emma reminds her, "if she knows he can't hurt her anymore..."

Regina stares silently at the ground, teeth worrying at her lower lip. It's Mary Margaret who finally answers, "I don't think that's how nightmares work. Rationally, I mean."

"Well, whatever psychological effect it ends up having, we *do* need to put away the guy who did it," says Locksley, with an air of finality like he's finally asserting his rank. "Regina?"

"Coming," she sighs, shoving trembling hands into her pockets and storming out the door, shoulders hunched up next to her ears. Locksley sighs and offers everyone in the room a half-hearted smile before jogging after her.

"You guys all know Spencer," Emma addresses Jones, Nolan, and Blanchard. "Do you believe...do you think a cop could have done this?"

Jones shrugs; Nolan rolls his eyes and blows out an angry huff of air like he's still focused on the shocking piece of family history he'd just learned. Mary Margaret says darkly, "It's always shocking what people are capable of, isn't it?"

Emma stares, shocked, at the typically optimistic ADA. "It sounds like you're dropping the ball on the whole 'innocent until proven guilty' thing."

"I know Spencer," Mary Margaret snaps. "I've known him for as long as I've known Regina. I don't know if he's guilty of *this*, but he's guilty of a lot of other horrendous things."

With that, she storms out in very much the same fashion that Regina had moments earlier, and Emma shakes her head in confusion.

Jones checks his watch and mutters something about needing a drink already.

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She hears the cry of "W'gina!" almost the instant she opens the door, and before she can even reply, Elsa is diving into her arms. "Hi, sweetheart," she says softly as the little girl's arms snake their way around her neck, clinging tightly like she's never going to let go. "How are you today?"

Elsa shrugs and leans her head on Regina's shoulder, almost as if to say, "Better now that you're here," and Regina feels the sticky ball of guilt in the pit of her stomach grow and churn, sending sharp pangs throughout her entire body, but she knows what she has to do.

"Elsa, there's something very, very important we'd like to talk to you about," she continues, carefully settling down in an armchair while Robin looks on apprehensively, fidgeting with the photo array inside his jacket. "Do you remember my friend?"

The toddler nods and whispers, "Wobin."

"That's right," he says, forcing a warm smile as he sits down next to them. "You've got a good memory."

"You're such a smart girl," Regina praises, arms tightening protectively around Elsa as though perhaps through sheer will-power, she can somehow protect the girl from the pain they're about to inflict. She hates herself right now. She hates *this*. "Now, we need you to try and remember something from last week. Do you think you can do that for us?"

Elsa nods again, but it's slower than before, and her tiny body starts to tremble. "I w'member," she whispers.

"We're going to show you six pictures," Robin explains. "And we need you to take a look and tell us if you know any of these men. Does that sound okay?"

"Is it the one who hurted Mommy and Daddy?" she asks, her voice coming out in a soft whimper.

"We don't know," admits Regina. "That's what we need you to tell us." Elsa curls against the detective's chest more tightly, still shaking, and Regina has to fight to keep the tears from her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she murmurs. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Robin clears his throat meaningfully. Regina ignores him.

Finally, Elsa looks up, eyes wide and frightened but unblinkingly brave. "Just pictures?" she asks.

"Right, just pictures," Locksley confirms. Regina nods reluctantly.

Elsa presses her face against Regina's neck again, but they can hear her answer, "Okay," and Regina starts to feel a huge sob that she can't fully explain rising up in her chest.

Robin pulls the photo array out of his jacket and says, "Whenever you're ready."

"Just take your time. We're not in a rush," Regina murmurs, hand running soothingly up and down the shivering child's back.

After a few minutes of reassurance, Elsa tentatively peeks her head up and glances at the photos. She doesn't say anything, but the shriek and the stricken look on her face tell the detectives everything they need to know.

"Elsa, can you tell us who you see?" Robin asks gently as he switches on the tape recorder.

There's a tiny sob and a brief period of silence where they're unsure if she's actually going to answer, but then Elsa raises her head again and says, "That's him."

Regina presses her lips together momentarily before forcing herself to ask for confirmation. "The one who hurt your parents?"

"Yes," whispers Elsa, and then she dissolves in tears.

"Which one? Can you tell us what number?"

Another moment of silence passes, broken only by the sound of a toddler's choking sobs, as Elsa buries her face in Regina's shoulder again. "Two," she finally manages to reply.

Regina sucks in a sharp breath and Robin presses his hand to his forehead. "Thank you," he says quietly, switching off the recorder as his posture deflates. Then, in an even smaller voice, "Fuck."

It's a couple of years old, but Albert Spencer's driver's license photo is pretty spot on.

Eyewitness identification isn't always reliable, especially from young children, but...

Robin's shaking his head. "I can't even...*why?*"

Regina shudders, her grip on Elsa tightening (perhaps too much, though the distraught little girl doesn't seem to mind it) as the room seems to spin around her. "Why do most criminals do what they do?" she asks with a harsh, humorless laugh, although she can't quite believe it herself. Spencer has always been cold, hateful...but *murderous?*

He'd promised to hurt her, all those years ago. He'd promised to "bring her down."

She assumes this has something to do with her – that this is somehow supposed to ruin her career like he'd said he would. She'd allowed herself to forget it; her time in the hospital after White's attack is still mostly a blur, and she'd honestly prefer to keep it that way.

"Lord Asshat – more like Lord Sociopath," Robin grumbles under his breath. "If this is about the tapes..."

"If he killed those people and ruined two children's lives just to get to me, I'll kill him myself," Regina says angrily.

Robin sighs heavily. "If this is about the tapes, then you need to get ready for a complete shit-storm from headquarters," he warns her. "Things could get...serious."

"I don't care," she growls. She supposes she *will* care, once she finally gets a chance to process everything, but right now all she can see is the crimson fire of her rage and the little girl crying quietly in her arms whose parents and innocence were apparently taken away by Spencer's quest for – well she doesn't know what it's for. Revenge? Causing misery just for the hell of it?

Still shaking his head, Robin stands up and mutters, "It seems I need to bring a former coworker in for questioning. This should be fun."

"W'gina, don't go!" Elsa suddenly wails, clinging to the detective as her sobs start to pick up again. "Stay!"

"Do you need me back at the station?" she asks Robin, leaning exhaustedly against the back of the chair with no intention of moving. She has a feeling she already knows the answer.

"Probably not as much as you're needed here," he answers. "Actually, it might be better for everyone involved if you're...you know, somewhere else. When we bring him in." He doesn't add "especially you," but it's obvious he's thinking it.

And she doesn't argue.

"We'll, um...we'll probably need to get someone from another department to do the actual interrogation," he continues, staring awkwardly at his restless hands before finally putting them in his pockets as he shifts his weight between his feet. "Or Swan, since she's...she's the only one who hasn't worked with him."

Regina bites her lower lip and tries to keep from bursting into tears. The things Spencer could say to Emma...

Apparently, destroying her career isn't enough; he's going to destroy her love life, too.

Well, to be honest, she's been doing a decent job of doing *that* on her own. If it weren't for Emma's superhuman capacity for forgiveness...

No, she can't keep thinking like this she's only making everything worse.

Elsa is still crying, begging Regina to stay with her, and the detective fights to will her mind back into the present.

"I'll stay, sweetheart. Don't worry," she coos. "I'm not going anywhere. Robin just has to go back to the police station to put the bad guy in jail where he can't hurt anyone. That's a good idea, right?"

It takes a few minutes of reassurance and promises Regina probably can't keep, but Elsa gradually calms, loosening her grip on Regina's neck enough that the woman can actually breathe, and Robin stands, offering a friendly nod to the girls' foster mother on his way out the door. Her name is Sara and she's nice enough, but she's only temporary. She doesn't want to be their *mother*, not the way –

No. She can't think like that. This is not something she'll ever be able to have, so it's not something she's allowed to want.

She forces a smile and asks, "So, would you like to do something?" with something that sounds dangerously close to desperation, hoping that an activity will help take both of their minds off of this ridiculous situation.

A cry comes from the other room, and Elsa is instantly on alert.

"Anna's awake," Sara reports. "Maybe she'd like to hang out with you two."

"That sounds great," replies Regina, smoothing Elsa's hair. "Maybe we can feed her and then read her a story together. Would you like that?"

Elsa nods slowly. "Okay," she finally agrees, "but I want *you* to make the story."

"Me?" Regina's eyebrows are arched practically to her hairline as she stands, scooping Elsa up with her, and makes her way to the small bedroom the girls are sharing. "I'm not much of a storyteller." But then Elsa's big blue eyes start to water again, and Regina grudgingly agrees. "Fine, but even if it's not exciting, you have to tell me you love it."

That gets a giggle out of the little girl, and she nods eagerly.

Regina sets Elsa down on the rocking chair before lifting Anna up from her crib and carefully squeezing in next to her. Elsa clambers up onto the detective's lap, and Sara helpfully hands her Anna's bottle.

The baby instantly stops crying as soon as she's eating, and Regina chuckles. "You're a hungry one, aren't you?" she asks. Not that she has *much* experience (as much time as she spent at the Locksleys' apartment, she was never in charge of feeding Roland), but Anna seems to spend every waking moment eating.

"Tell the story," Elsa begs.

"Fine," Regina sighs, hoping Henry won't mind a little bit of plagiarism – desperate times call for desperate measures – and starts to tell the story of Queen Regina and Prince Henry and their troublesome pet swan, including her transformation into a beautiful princess. Elsa sits silently, captivated the entire time, and she makes a note to herself to tell Henry it could easily become a children's bestseller.

"W'gina," Elsa whispers dreamily when it's finally finished, "is that true?"

"Of course it is," Regina promises. Then she presses a kiss onto Elsa's forehead and watches fondly as the little girl drifts off to sleep, thumb in her mouth and the edges of her lips quirked upwards into the first real smile Regina's ever seen on her.

Then she wonders how the hell she's ever going to leave.

xx

Regina winces as she shifts her weight in the uncomfortable hospital bed and feels the strain in her stitches. She's been in here for over a week and lying in one place is becoming increasingly depressing, but even the smallest of movements still causes searing pain. She's alone, again, with only a long, monotonous line of beeps (or at least they'd better stay monotonous) to entertain her.

Not that it matters. There's only one person she wants with her, and it's the one person who can't be.

Without him, she'll always be alone.

Her eyes are squeezed tightly shut – a poor attempt at pretending to sleep – when she hears the door creak open. She wonders who it could be this time. The nurse just left; the plastic surgeon isn't coming until the afternoon; Robin and Marian have both used up their leave, so they're at the station; and she'd kicked her parents out a while ago. She's surprised at how well they've listened; but then again, she supposes she may have hurt their feelings.

The only other possibility that comes to mind is that it might be Internal Affairs. If Spencer turned in the tapes...

No, there's not much chance of that. If he turns in the tapes, his career is as over as hers. Perhaps even more so, except that he's a veteran old white man and she's...well, she's herself. They'll probably even believe whatever ridiculous lie he concocts about how he hadn't heard the safe word, or he hadn't had time to call backup – they'll believe anything he says.

And the bungled investigation will be her fault.

Daniel and Henry's deaths will be her fault.

Daniel and Henry's deaths are *her fault.*

"Mills," a cold, hard voice says from above her, "open your eyes."

She does and immediately wishes she hadn't, because on the list of people she'd least like to see today, he's number four: Leopold White, his insipid daughter, the chief of Internal Affairs, and then her venerable partner himself: Albert Spencer.

She gives him a brief nod . Her jaw is wired, but she can talk – she's just not interested in wasting any of her words on him.

"Seems like you lucked out."

Lucked out? She's not sure whether to laugh or cry – in what universe would someone in her predicament possibly be considered lucky?

He thrusts a newspaper in her face and barks, "The city is calling you a hero – lauding your 'sacrifice' as some kind of Hail Mary pass to put a stop to White's killing spree. The mayor's talking about giving you a medal."

Regina's barely listening – White's mug shot is staring her down and her entire body is trembling uncontrollably at the very sight of it – but she doesn't understand a word of what she's hearing. Hero? Sacrifice?

The mayor wants to give her a medal for getting her fiancé and unborn son killed?

"It's all a load of horseshit, if you ask me, but the good news is that there's no way now for the old psychopath to escape this. They finally found two of the bodies buried near the cottage you told us about."

"Belle French?" she asks, gritting out the slurred words through her immobilized jaw.

"Forensics aren't back yet, but it's looking that way."

At least Judge Gold has his answers now, and she's owed a favor, but she can't think of a single thing he could do for her that would make this even remotely worthwhile.

Spencer finally yanks the paper away from her face (she tries not to let him see her sigh of relief) and snaps, "So, as much of a liability as you are, I'm not feeling particularly inclined to destroy your career at the moment."

She just stares at him.

"You might consider thanking me. It's not like you have anything else to live for anymore. Yeah, Locksley told me."

She wonders if there's a way she can kill Robin without having to move.

A barely audible grunt is the closest to thanks she's willing to give.

"I'm going to hide the tapes from that little...incident – there's nothing relevant to the case on them, anyway. You'll just have to keep that out of your testimony, and we'll be all set."

Little incident? Is that what he's calling the time he'd listened to Leopold White raping her?

Testimony?

She imagines she'll need to be re-briefed on all of this once she's off of the painkillers, because she's not processing any of it.

"But one day, Regina, I will use those tapes to bring you down. They may think you're a hero now, but you're going to retire a disgrace. And that is all the victory I need."

He's staring like he expects her to respond. "Whatever," she mutters.

She's never been more grateful to hear the door open again. "Your blood pressure and heart rate are elevated," one of the nurses – Astrid is her name, she's fairly certain – tuts, shaking her head at the readings flashing across the monitor. One-forty over one hundred. She's heard her mother scold her father about his diet enough to know that's not great.

Astrid shakes her head as she presses a cool cloth to Regina's forehead. "Your temperature's a little high as well. I'm going to need to check your stomach wound and make sure it's not getting infected."

"I don't want –"

As if she's only just noticing that there's an unwanted guest in the room, Astrid suddenly tells Spencer, "I'm sorry, the patient needs privacy for this."

"Of course," Spencer tells the nurse with a false sweetness that Regina finds nauseating, "I was just on my way out." He nods to both of them and stalks out the door, leaving Regina to breathe a heavy sigh that embarrassingly turns into a sob about halfway through.

"Oh, sweetheart," Astrid murmurs. She'd been about to peel away the bandages on Regina's stomach, but she instantly stops and relocates to the chair beside the bed, squeezing Regina's hand tightly. "I know this is horrible, but you're being so brave. Are you sure there isn't something I can do to help you feel better?"

Regina squeezes her eyes shut again and shrugs one shoulder, trying desperately to remain composed. Right now, the only two things that would make her feel better are bringing Daniel back to life or killing Leopold White, and neither one is possible right now.

"You're going to get through this," Astrid tells her with far more confidence than she should. "I know it doesn't feel possible right now, but you will. You survived, and there's a reason for that. You just have to find it."

She'd like to complain about the nurse's ridiculous platitudes, but she barely even has the energy to roll her eyes before Astrid starts lifting up her hospital gown and it takes all of her energy not to lose track of where she is with each sharp burst of pain that accompanies the pokes and prods. But it's alright if she forgets about Spencer's visit.

He'll remind her.

xx

"So, Spencer set up everything," Humbert marvels, gaping at the bank records Jones has just pulled up. There's a withdrawal from his account of the exact amount that had been deposited into Malinda Black's two

days later, and they're past the point of believing in coincidences. "He paid Malinda Black to help him kill the Arendts?"

"He paid her for *something*," Jones replies. "The evidence is right here. And I don't think she was doing his yard work."

Not that it really matters, Emma thinks, storming into the squad room with Locksley, Blanchard, and District Attorney Eugenia Lucas close behind her. The jerk – not a strong enough word for him, but Emma can't think clearly enough to come up with one at the moment – had confessed to everything, with a threat to hand over some kind of "tapes" to the press and Internal Affairs unless they drop the charges.

Emma has no idea what's on those tapes except that it has to do with his and Regina's work on the White case, but from Locksley and Blanchard's reactions, she assumes it's nothing good.

"It's about time" was the first thing he'd said when she'd brought him in, a cold, thoroughly evil grin on his face. He'd given her the chills.

He'd wanted to get caught. He'd considered all of it – killing, traumatizing young children – a little game to get at Regina.

Which he *won't* – not if Emma has anything to do with it.

Then again, she doesn't have anything to do with it. The whole thing is about to get handed over to IAB for conflict-of-interest reasons, and there won't be anyone with an interest in protecting Regina involved in the case. The thought of it sends a shiver down Emma's spine and a wave of nausea through her gut.

Even Mary Margaret's off the case: her superior is insisting on handling it all herself. Not that it's *such* a big surprise – she probably should have been off of it the second a picture of her dead mother became evidence – but it's troubling. Emma knows nothing about DA Lucas. She knows nothing about the politics involved.

And the fact that he's now trying to blackmail them into a deal makes all of it even worse.

"We need to see what's on these tapes he keeps talking about," Lucas is telling Locksley. "I'm not willing to make any concessions, but if anything on there could affect the White verdict, then we need to tread carefully."

"I'm sure there's nothing on the tapes that would affect the White verdict," Blanchard argues, voice tight and miserable. And she'd probably know better than anyone. "But there's –"

"If what he says is true and Mills lied under oath, then yes there is," says Lucas. "Look, I know this is personal for you, but that's why I need you to stay out of it."

Emma immediately protests, "Regina wouldn't lie under oath!"

But then Locksley looks at her with big, sad eyes and she feels her heart sink down to her stomach. Because the only reason she can imagine that Regina would put *everything* she'd worked for at risk is...

"She didn't," Mary Margaret insists. "Not about anything that actually pertains to the case. Just –"

"Mary Margaret Blanchard, if you don't stop talking *this second*, I will –"

"Regina!" Locksley warns.

Emma stares apprehensively at Regina, who's just entered the squad room looking about as upset as any of them (most of them, anyway) have ever seen her. "Hi," she says weakly.

"I did *not* commit perjury," Regina growls, ignoring Emma's greeting in favor of shooting the District Attorney her most terrifying glare. Lucas seems unfazed.

"Maybe not, but your partner withheld evidence, and you apparently knew about it, so if there's anything you want to say before IAB gets here, you'd better start talking."

Regina sighs and sits at her desk, shoulders hunched. "The tapes...the tapes from my undercover assignment that were withheld did not contain information pertinent to the investigation against White. Nothing on them would invalidate the verdict."

"That's what I was trying to tell them," ADA Blanchard interrupts, which immediately draws the full weight of the senior detective's fury.

"Shut *up*, Mary Margaret," she hisses.

"Okay," Locksley says with admirable calm, "let's all just tone down the hostility for a moment and discuss this. Regina, no one is accusing you of perjury." Regina gives a small snort of disbelief, eyes still fixed on DA Lucas. "But we *do* need consider the fact that Spencer withheld evidence in the case –"

"It's not *evidence*."

"Spencer withheld information that could perhaps be considered evidence, if the attorneys and judges had ever reviewed it, which they didn't," he finishes, sighing heavily, and shakes his head like he's trying to clear it. "I still can't quite believe it. The whole thing – I'm kicking myself for ignoring it this whole time. The picture of Eva Blanchard, the baby at the crime scene – that was reminiscent of a case he and I worked together – even at the warehouse: Elsa was a set-up. He knew you'd rescue her, and then..."

"And then *what*?" Emma demands angrily. "He could get caught and hand over some tapes?"

"He didn't get caught," Blanchard corrects. "He confessed. And the confession could just as easily be deemed inadmissible."

"But we have the girl!" protests Jones.

"Who is three years old and not necessarily a reliable witness. Not to mention her closeness to Regina, who's credibility could be undermined if the tapes –"

"For the last time, I did not lie under oath, and the tapes are not evidence in the case."

"For the last time, we have no means of knowing that. And," Lucas continues, returning Regina's glare with a menacing one of her own, "the fact that this 'potential' evidence is just now coming to light could affect more than just the verdict."

Suddenly putting it together in her mind, Emma stares horrorstruck at Regina and, without thinking, blurts out, "Wait, does that mean –"

"Why don't you all just listen to the damned tapes and come to your own conclusions?" Regina snaps. "Is Spencer still in there? Tell him to hand

them over so you can play them for the entire squad! Make a big party out of it! Pop some popcorn!"

"Regina..." Locksley's voice trails off, like he knows trying to keep her calm is a lost cause.

"Get the tapes!" she practically hollers, the vein in her forehead pulsing dangerously. "Turn them in to IAB – I don't care! Just...stop talking about it and *do* something, because he needs to be in jail yesterday!"

Mary Margaret's hands are fidgeting and when she speaks, she sounds like she's about to cry. "Regina, Locksley's trying to protect you. If –"

Her eyes flashing and her face contorted into an expression of sheer rage, Regina turns on the ADA and says in an almost deathly quiet voice, "I do not require Locksley's protection. This charade has gone on long enough. Get the tapes. Get Spencer."

"Brilliant idea," says the large, balding man who's just entered the room. Emma's not sure of his name, but she's seen him before and she can tell just by the way the other detectives react that he's one of the higher ups in Internal Affairs. He's carrying a manila folder labeled "Leopold White Investigation" – *damn, these guys work fast*, Emma thinks – and carrying himself with an air of grim satisfaction. "Lieutenant, DA Lucas, shall we?"

"Not in my office," Locksley mutters, jerking his head toward the glass panel in the door. Through it, they can see Roland and Henry happily writing and drawing, unaware of the tension that's weighing down the very air just across the wall. "One of the interview rooms."

The IAB guy – Emma makes a mental note to ask someone, probably Jones, who seems the least perturbed by all of this, his name – beckons for everyone to follow him. DA Lucas trails after him, with Locksley a bit further behind, looking as if he's been treated with electric shocks. Jones, Nolan, and Humbert exchange stricken looks before sitting awkwardly at their desks, eyes carefully averted from both Mary Margaret and Regina. The ADA is pacing rapidly back and forth, wringing her hands, while Regina is slumped over in her chair, her fingers white as she clutches the edge of her desk like she'll die if she allows her grip to loosen for even an instant.

"You can go," Regina says hollowly, "listen to the tapes. I don't mind."

"We're...we're good," Humbert stammers. "We...um...who wants donuts?"

Booth and Jones immediately jump up, pass a still pouting Nolan his crutches, and scurry out the door.

"Cowards!" Regina calls after them.

Emma rolls her eyes, but she understands the need for bravado. She may not know *exactly* what's on the tapes, but she can guess at it and the thought makes her sick. Even if Regina didn't mind, she doesn't particularly want to hear it. Instead, she sits down at her desk and starts filling out paperwork. Whenever IAB decides they're taking over this investigation, they'll want Spencer's confession accurately documented.

Regina finally seems to notice her, snapping out of a daze to demand, "Are you not going in there?"

Emma shrugs uncomfortably. "I figured you wouldn't want me to."

"I don't care what you do."

"We promised we wouldn't lie about our feelings," Emma reminds the senior detective with a sigh. "We promised we'd talk about stuff. That was, like, this morning."

Visibly deflating, Regina sags against her chair and admits without a trace of defiance, "I don't want you to. But I think...I don't want you to feel like you can't just because –" She stops short, and her eyes flicker over to Mary Margaret, who groans.

"I know you're dating," the ADA says impatiently.

"Well, anyway," says Emma, "I don't want to."

"Because it might lead you to think less of me?"

"What? God, no! I mean, I'm ninety percent sure I already know what's on it, and, like...Regina, no. I wouldn't think any less of you."

"Then why not hear it, if you already know?" Regina challenges. There's a hint of a bite to her tone, but Emma knows it's only there to keep her from falling apart completely. When Emma doesn't answer right away, she hangs her head in shame. "I'm sorry, I know I –"

"Remember when I got shot?" Emma finally asks, causing Regina's head to snap back up.

"Yes."

"Well, um...you know how that wasn't fun for you? To see, I mean."

It takes Regina a moment to process, but once she does, her eyes soften, and she mouths, "Thank you," lips trembling with emotion and exhaustion.

Blanchard's phone rings, and she glances quickly at it, perturbed, before half-jogging out to the hallway.

"I'm sorry," Emma says helplessly. "About all of this."

Regina shakes her head. "I just...I don't understand," she murmurs, mostly to herself. "It's not – what's on the tape isn't...it doesn't have anything to do with the actual charges against White. It's just...it's embarrassing. For me. And it could...IAB might decide...it *wouldn't* change the verdict in the case, but..."

"You don't have to tell me," Emma offers.

"I'm just...I suppose I'm trying to make sense of Spencer's motivations. This could hurt my standing on the force, but I never lied in court, and he's the one who failed to deliver the evidence."

"But you knew?"

"I *knew*. I was...well, I'm not proud of how I handled everything at the time, but I was..."

"You weren't exactly in awesome shape – emotionally, I mean."

"No." Regina sighs, running her hand through her hair. "He said...he told me he'd keep that tape until a time when he could bring it out to ruin my career, but I always assumed – it would ruin him as much as it would me!" she finally exclaims. "He's the one who didn't – I couldn't fight back without blowing my cover, and –"

"It's okay, you don't have to –"

"I do, though! I don't understand why he's doing this – why *now*? I'll probably have to pay, too, but this is on him; all of it is on him. And if White gets exonerated because of this, that's all of *his* hard work down the drain, too!"

Mary Margaret comes back into the room then, her face even paler than usual and her hands trembling so hard she might drop her phone. "White's not getting exonerated," she says quietly. "He's not getting anything, except a burial, I guess. He's dead."

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Notes: I'm so, so sorry this chapter took a month to finish. Travels and health crises and real life and all of that. Consider this my 17000-word apology. Also, just so you know where this fic is going, there are two chapters left after this one.

TW: discussions of all the usual – you probably know the drill by now. Murder, rape, abuse, attempted suicide, PTSD and anxiety, etc. This is such a happy story, isn't it?

Lucas is muttering angrily to herself as she walks back into the squad room with Locksley and a shifty-eyed group of Internal Affairs guys behind her. "Well, of course I'm going to prosecute – he's delusional if he thinks that tape is any kind of leverage. Then again, any defense attorney worth their keep would have him out on an insanity plea before the trial even starts."

"So, you think he's -"

"You can bring in Hopper to take a look at him," the District Attorney grunts, "but yes. As much as I'd like to see him rot in solitary for the rest of his life, there's no denying that the man is seriously unhinged."

"I trust," says a tall, pompous guy who seems to be in charge, "that the matter will be handled quickly and discreetly. You can imagine how this might reflect on BPD if the press gets involved."

Damn right, Emma thinks angrily. She *hopes* the press gets involved. She'd like to see Spencer and all the people who had let this *thing* get to this point publicly crucified. No punishment the courts could give them will ever be enough.

"Not my problem," Lucas snaps, and Emma thinks she might like to hug the woman if such a move wouldn't likely result in serious injury.

"The commissioner's on his way," a short man with a mustache tells Regina. "We need to get a statement about the events on this tape from you as soon as possible."

"Yes, of course."

"There's also the matter of your role in hiding the evidence and what that might mean for your future," the tall one adds cryptically. *How dare they?* thinks Emma, instantly on the defensive, but Regina seems strangely unperturbed.

Actually, aside from one loud gasp after Mary Margaret had delivered the news, she's been strangely unperturbed about everything.

Emma had been nervous, to say the least, about the Regina's reaction to the cascade of events they're suddenly facing. Mentally reliving part of her torture, the arrest of her former partner, even White's death...that last one should probably be the cause of celebration, but it seems just as likely, given everything else going on, to trigger some kind of horrific flashback that leaves the detective crying and trembling on the floor.

But neither of those things has happened.

Instead, she's pretty calm about the whole thing. But she's also not totally *here*.

"Where the hell is Blanchard?" Lucas suddenly demands.

"Umm..." Emma looks helplessly at the guys, all of whom are suddenly pretending to be occupied with paperwork. She's not quite sure how to explain what happened. "Blanchard had to go. She had...um...she had a family emergency."

Locksley's eyes narrow.

"Her dad died," Nolan offers, finally stepping up to help. "I guess he had pneumonia or something."

There's a collective gasp around the room as everyone finally puts two and two together, and Emma has never seen anyone's jaw drop quite as low as Lucas's does in that moment. "You're joking," says flatly.

Jones rolls his eyes and asks, "What about this situation looks like a joke to you?"

"How did it happen?" Locksley demands and instantly moves over to stand protectively behind Regina, causing Emma to sigh irritably and mentally kick herself seconds later. This isn't a competition and it's not about her.

It's just been that kind of day.

No, that kind of week.

"How do you think it happened?" she growls impatiently while the other detectives all stammer out non-answers. "The guy had pneumonia – kind of risky for a quadriplegic. I guess he's been back and forth between the prison and the hospital all week, and the treatment just...failed."

"I'd love to express my condolences, but sadly I can't seem to find any. Hope the bastard enjoys rotting in hell," says Jones, with another eye-roll that Emma feels is probably in poor taste even if she can't help but relate to it.

Locksley crouches down to Regina's eye-level and gently asks, "Are you alright?" She blinks, seemingly startled that someone is speaking to her. Her eyes seem slightly unfocused, and her hand is tapping out a rhythm on the side of her desk with a pen she'd stolen from Nolan.

"Yes, I'm fine," she answers immediately, sounding almost robotic.

"So, you're not fine at all," he sighs. "Look, guys, this statement – it couldn't wait until Monday, could it?"

"Lieutenant, are you suggesting your detective will be unable to answer a few simple questions?" the tall IAB guy asks with no attempt to mask the disdain in his tone. "It wasn't too long ago that you were insisting she would have no problem returning to active duty."

Caught in a trap, Locksley stares at his feet.

"To be fair," Jones points out, "one could easily argue that our day-to-day routine, even on the busiest days, is far less stressful than being grilled by the commissioner when you've just..."

He trails off, silenced by glares from everyone in the room. The shorter IAB guy is turning a dangerous shade of red.

"Fuck," mumbles Locksley, and Emma stares at Regina, shocked that the senior detective hasn't reacted at all to these people talking like she's not even in the room. She's clinging to Locksley's hand but otherwise still seems like she's in her own safe little fog.

Good. Maybe she can just stay there and not have to deal with this.

She deserves to feel safe for once.

Locksley lowers his voice and starts to ask Emma, "So, she's been like this ever since..."

"Pretty much since Blanchard dropped the bomb, yeah," Emma explains impatiently, a hint of annoyance at the ADA creeping unintentionally into her voice. She doesn't blame Mary Margaret – her father had died, after all, and it's not like she had anyone else to turn to. Still, it wouldn't have hurt to consider her audience, or at least the situation.

Then again, she's not sure any time or place would have been ideal.

"He certainly picked a great day to die," Lucas says with a loud harrumph. "When it rains, it pours."

"Yeah, well, now it's storming like a bitch," Emma grumbles.

This is wrong. It's all wrong. She wants to scoop Regina and Henry into her arms and get all of them out of here right now, but the head of IAB is glaring at her and the commissioner is walking into the room and she's scared out of her mind. *This is probably the wrong day to come out at work*, she thinks wryly.

She's also not entirely sure how Regina would react to being touched, given that she's currently swatting Locksley's hand away from her with the sort of expression she might have if she was being attacked by a poisonous snake.

"Good afternoon, everyone." At the deep rumble of Commissioner Sid's voice, everyone looks up with mirroring expressions of dread. "I take it we have some things to discuss."

xx

"Listen, Mills," says Sid, all business. He's just finished listening to the tape (through headphones, thankfully), and she's sitting at an interrogation table with two of the officers from Internal Affairs and he's leaning over her in a way that might be intimidating if she cared, and she has absolutely no idea what he wants. "I won't beat around the bush. The DA wants to get Spencer in front of a grand jury as quickly as possible, and when that happens, the tape is going to be evidence."

"Okay?" Regina mutters, noting with distaste that it's apparently only "the DA" who wants Spencer indicted. Not that she'd expect any differently from Sid – he's wanted her off the force since the very beginning. Hell, he'll probably even provide Spencer with a state-funded attorney.

"The press is going to be all over this case – cops gone bad make headlines like no other. The evidence is going to become public record, whether we like it or not."

What is his point?

"My public humiliation seems a small price to pay for putting a murderer behind bars," she says coolly. She doesn't mention the fact that she's paid much higher; he knows she's thinking it.

Sid clears his throat and turns away for a second. "Here's the thing," he explains, "we can't – keeping you on the force with all of this coming to light is going to look...well, let's just say it wouldn't look great."

"Keeping *me* on the force?" She knew this was coming: she's known it's been coming for years, and yet the words still feel like a brick has been dropped on her chest as she struggles against her outrage to breathe. "I did nothing wrong!" she sputters.

"Having sexual intercourse with a suspect is generally not considered standard procedure."

"I – what? You heard the tape," Regina protests, practically screaming now. "You...what about that sounded even slightly consensual? Spencer –"

"I'm not saying it was your fault," he allows, still carefully avoiding her eyes, "but the fact that you didn't disclose it – the fact that that the evidence was withheld – you have to consider how it would seem to the public, keeping you on after you've been...compromised. Mills, I have nothing but respect for you and everything you've accomplished, even against considerable odds, but we've got a fairly low approval rating to begin with, and –"

"And that's because of *me*?" screeches Regina. "Watch five minutes of any news channel and tell me to my face that firing me is magically going to make everyone trust the police?"

"We're not *firing* you."

"No, you'd like me to quit on my own. Well, congratulations, you win!" she spits as she stands and stalks out of the room, slamming the door in his face behind her. He's saying something, but she can't hear it through the red haze that seems to surround her head, blocking out everything except the path directly in front of her. By the time she makes it to the squad room, her entire body is trembling and she's practically in tears,

but she decides she can hold herself together for about sixty more seconds as she makes a beeline for Emma.

"Give me your keys; I need to get out of here," she hisses. When the other woman doesn't respond, Regina almost screams in frustration before realizing she's on the phone.

"Yeah, I know," Emma says gently into the receiver, eyes bright and wide with concern. "Just tell me where you are, okay?" Some noise comes from the other end in response, Emma nods and says, "Okay, sit tight," and then she hangs up. "Hey," she says softly, taking a quick look around the room before shrugging and pulling Regina into her arms.

The next thing Regina knows, she's collapsed against Emma and tears are starting to stream down her cheeks, and everyone is watching but she's so far beyond caring that she barely gives it a second thought.

It's not like she has a job to worry about, anyway.

"I need to leave," she repeats, face buried in Emma's shirt as gentle hands run tentatively up and down her back. She feels Emma's neck crane upward and rotate, like she's searching for something (probably permission), and then she nods.

"Okay, let's leave," she says before calling out, "Henry! Get your coat!"

Henry pokes his head out of Locksley's office, looking thrilled until he sees the crowd of people in the squad room. "Are we going home?" he asks hopefully.

"Yes. No." Emma sighs. "We're getting out of here, anyway."

And that appears to be good enough – Henry immediately darts out of the office, books practically falling out of his hands as he waves a half-hearted goodbye to Roland. "Come on!" he exclaims, and he's almost halfway to the parking garage before either of the women even have their jackets on, reluctant to let go of each other for even the miniscule amount of time required to walk to the elevator.

"What happened?" Emma whispers on their way out the door, one arm wrapped protectively around Regina's waist. It probably won't support her if her legs give out, but it's a nice thought.

"I'm not sure."

They move slowly and clumsily together, still figuring out where their bodies begin and end, and Henry is bouncing impatiently in front of the elevator.

"I – I think I quit," Regina says faintly, a wave of nausea washing over her as she suddenly wishes she could turn back time, and Emma stops short.

"You *what*?" she demands, but then she just shrugs squeezes Regina tighter before promising, "We'll figure it out later. Everything's going to be okay."

Regina shakes her head. "You can't promise that," she almost laughs.

"I know," sighs Emma, "but what else do you want me to say?"

"I'm not sure."

They spend another minute at a standstill in the middle of the hall, holding onto each other as if the world is ending around them until Henry clears his throat.

"The leaving thing?" he demands.

"Right. Um..." Darting a brief, furtive glance at Henry, Emma tilts her head against Regina's and says under her breath, "By the way, we have a brief...um...we have a quick little mission to accomplish on the way home – I mean, on our way to wherever we end up going."

"Just tell me."

"That was Mary Margaret on the phone before and, um...she's not doing so well."

"Not doing so well?" Regina asks tiredly. "What do you mean? How?"

"She's, like – well, she's apparently drinking kind of heavily right now," Emma finally manages to spit out. "And not in a happy drunk kind of way."

"Oh, so she needs a ride?"

"Right."

Regina nods along, pretending this all makes sense to her even though she feels like she's on a different planet. Blanchard is drunk? She's not completely sure what time it is, but it's still light outside and everyone else is still at work. That's not like Mary Margaret at all, she wouldn't –

Oh.

Oh.

There's a roaring in her ears and the room blurs before her eyes as everything seems to spin around her, and she barely makes it to the trash can next to the elevator door before the nausea returns in an

overpowering crash. She thinks she feels Emma's light touch on the small of her back as she dry-heaves over and over, half worried she might black out and half hoping for any kind of relief from consciousness, however brief it may be.

"What's going on?" asks Henry, taking a step back.

Regina hears a loud sigh from right above her shoulder, and there's a brief pause before Emma mutters, "Nothing good."

"Is Regina sick?"

No. No, this can't be happening.

It's one thing to break down in front of Emma, who's now used to it and apparently immune anyway; it's quite another to do so in front of Emma's ten-year-old son.

How had she forgotten? In all the chaos with Spencer, she'd had other things on her mind, but it hadn't been *that* long ago that Mary Margaret had announced the news.

And why is she reacting like this?

She should be happy.

Should she be happy?

Leopold White is dead, but it's not bringing her the relief she's always anticipated.

Instead, it feels like she's thrashing, a lead weight strapped to her chest, as the flood waters rise above her head. Again.

"Regina?" Emma says softly, brushing a sweat-soaked lock of hair out of Regina's eyes. "Talk to me, okay? What's going on in your head right now?"

It's hard to speak through the tightness in her chest and if she knew what was going on in her head, they probably wouldn't be in this situation to begin with, but Emma is scared, too, and Emma loves her and she's trying so hard to help. "I don't know," Regina chokes.

Emma exhales and says, "Okay. Let's just...let's breathe. We'll breathe, and then...then we'll sort through this. All of it."

"Mary Margaret?" With Emma's arms supporting her, Regina manages to stand and then immediately collapses against the blonde's chest, body trembling against her will.

"Mary Margaret won't die if she has to wait a few minutes." Emma's voice is miraculously calm and soothing, given that Regina can feel her heart practically pounding out of her chest, and she feels horribly guilty about it. "Whatever happens, keeping you safe is our priority, okay? Henry and I love you. Deep breaths; ready? In – one, two..."

Regina takes a breath that sounds more like a gasp, and then another and another, slowly relaxing as her chest and Emma's rise and fall in unison, until she finally feels that she can stand without leaning against Emma. She can feel Emma's pulse start to slow along with her own, and when she makes herself look up, she's relieved to see that the other woman is smiling.

"Hey, there you are," she says, tracing her thumb along Regina's cheekbone to wipe away a stray tear. "You think you can make it to the car?"

"Yes," Regina immediately replies with far more confidence than she feels. "I - I have to -"

"One thing at a time," Emma suggests. "You don't have to do anything yet. We'll talk about all of it - White and Spencer and whatever the hell you said to the Commissioner, but for now, let's just focus on getting Mary Margaret home and then getting us home and, like...snuggling. Is that alright?"

Regina nods, leaning her head against Emma's shoulder as Henry, with a long-suffering sigh, punches the elevator button.

"Thanks for waiting, kid," Emma murmurs, ruffling his hair with a wry smile while Regina reaches across to squeeze his hand. "Sorry about all of that."

"It's fine. Can we go home and play Mario Kart?"

"Yeah...yeah, that sounds good."

Emma slings one arm over each of their shoulders and leads them onto the elevator, still taking exaggeratedly deep breaths. She's calm and smiling and Regina gets the impression that it's for her benefit, but she feels her heart sinking lower and lower as the elevator descends. She can force White and Spencer out of her mind, at least temporarily, but thinking about Mary Margaret isn't much better.

"How long was I talking with Sid?" she wonders out loud.

"Not long," Emma says with a shrug.

"How long was I out of it before he showed up?"

"Also not long."

"And Mary Margaret is...already drunk?"

"Yeah," sighs Emma, staring down at increasingly fidgety feet, "she...um...yeah. She didn't seem to be doing so well."

"Someone should stay with her," Regina says worriedly. "Her father just died. She has no one. I think...I really don't think she should be alone right now."

Emma bites her lower lip like she's about to protest, but then she agrees, under her breath and with a troubled look at her son, "Right, but I don't know how great it will be for Henry to be around...well, you know."

"I know."

None of this is great for Henry.

Then again, it's not great for anyone.

And as much as she hates to admit it, it's probably the worst for Mary Margaret Blanchard, whom she'd love to pretend that she doesn't care

about.

For over a decade, she'd done that very well; she'd hidden any concern for the young woman's well-being under layers of anger and resentment, but today's events make it impossible.

Their past makes it impossible.

"Maybe..." Emma sighs and then shakes her head. "Maybe I could spend some time with her and you could take Henry home? Would that be - would you be okay with that? I don't want - I mean, it's not that I'm not worried about Mary Margaret, but I don't want you to be alone either, and -"

"I will stay with Mary Margaret," Regina suddenly declares.

"You - what? Regina, no. I don't -"

"You've dealt with enough tonight, you don't need to take care of Miss Blanchard as well. Go home; have a nice night with your son."

"Wait, you're not coming?" Henry whines.

"Regina, no offense, but you don't even like Mary Margaret, and -"

"And you don't know her the way I do. And you...Emma, you didn't know her father. You can't - she needs me. I can help." Well, actually, "I can help" might be a lie, but there are some things that Emma doesn't know that aren't Regina's place to tell her.

And Mary Margaret won't.

Mary Margaret can't.

Emma rolls her eyes and says, "Don't take this the wrong way, but you were barely on your own feet a few minutes ago, so this...whatever you're planning to do to help Blanchard is going to be, like, the blind leading the blind, if you know what I mean. And, I mean...I'm just worried. About you."

"We'll be fine," Regina promises in a monotone, refusing to meet Emma's eyes. "Everything will be fine."

At this point, it has to be.

The alternative is unthinkable.

"But you just - you are seriously confusing me right now," Emma cries out in frustration as they exit the elevator.

"If it makes you feel any better, I'm probably confusing myself even more," Regina mutters, but both of her companions are already getting into the car.

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It takes a while to shake Emma off. Not that she should be so surprised: the blonde is nothing if not persistent, but she has her son to think of, and she certainly can't take Henry into a bar.

Well, she *shouldn't* anyway. Especially not if Blanchard's doing as poorly as Emma seems to think she is.

Thank god she finally seems to have realized that.

"Call me," she says, voice tight with worry. "I mean it. If you or Mary Margaret need anything. Do you want to take the car?"

Regina almost snorts, but she chokes it back at the last minute.

Emma means well, she reminds herself. *Emma loves you.*

She may want to help, but this – whatever the hell this is – needs to be between Regina and Mary Margaret.

It's always been between Regina and Mary Margaret.

Like it or not, they're the only ones who could possibly even begin to understand what the other is going through.

Well, actually, she's not giving Emma enough credit. *Maybe* Emma could understand – she'd certainly try, anyway – but Regina doesn't have the emotional energy to explain it to her.

She doesn't even know if she can explain it to herself.

"I'll take a cab. Have a good night!" she calls before she slams the door shut, forcing a smile for Henry's sake. "Rain check on the lasagna?"

He shrugs, clearly annoyed, but Emma's just finished giving him a long lecture about the pain of losing a parent and the need to be there for

Mary Margaret during her time of crisis, so he won't say anything. It's still written all across his face, though, and she still feels guilty.

"Call me," Emma repeats.

Regina grunts in acknowledgement and keeps her head bowed down, avoiding eye contact as she strides into The Lion Flower. She finds Mary Margaret just as she expected: at the bar, alone.

"They say it's always five o'clock somewhere," she jokes, trying to ignore the sharp pang she feels in her stomach at the fact that a girl she'd once seen almost as a daughter (a little sister, at the very least) is drinking like a bitter alcoholic in the middle of the afternoon.

"What are you doing here, Regina?" the ADA demands, a slight slur to her words indicating that the tumbler of gin she's just emptied definitely not the first. "Come to gloat?"

Regina sighs and shakes her head. "Not a whole lot to gloat about," she mutters.

"Please." There's a hard, cruel edge in Mary Margaret's voice, a bitterness that Regina has never heard there before. "Don't try to tell me you came here in sympathy or any crap like that. We both know you're happy about it, and it's your right to be. I'm surprised you're not organizing a parade right now."

"I'm not *happy*," Regina snaps.

"Then you're a fool."

Shaking her head, Regina changes the subject before the exhaustion of sifting through the avalanche of her conflicting emotions overwhelms her. "I didn't come here in sympathy. I came here because I didn't want you to be alone."

"Maybe I wanted to be alone."

"No one wants to be alone."

Mary Margaret grunts and waves her hand for another drink. She doesn't argue, though.

"Are you here to drink with me, then?"

"No," Regina replies coldly with a pointed glare at the bartender, who holds his hands in surrender before filling up a tall glass of water. "I'm here to take you home."

"Don't want to go home," Mary Margaret says stubbornly, arms crossed over her chest.

"Your liver will thank me later."

"I hate you," the drunk ADA says unconvincingly. "I called Emma, not you."

"Some conversations you can only have with people you hate."

That draws a snort. "Emma's son is here this weekend, too, right?"

"Right."

"I bet she'd celebrate with you. I can take care of myself."

"I don't want to celebrate," Regina mutters. Mary Margaret side-eyes her disbelievingly. "I...as glad – as *relieved* – as I am that your father is no longer part of this world, I'm not...his death doesn't change anything for me," she finally manages to explain. It's the closest she can get to the truth without exposing so many open wounds she'll stop being able to function. "It doesn't – I can't go back to a time before I knew him."

Mary Margaret nods. "Wouldn't *that* be nice," she says darkly. "That's what I like about you, Regina. You always tell it like it is; you don't pull any punches."

"About one minute ago, you claimed to hate me."

"It's complicated. Hey, we should make that our relationship status on Facebook!"

"I'm not on Facebook. Drink your water."

Pouting like a scolded child, Mary Margaret reluctantly obeys, with no shortage of eye-rolling. Regina has to stop herself from saying, "Good girl."

Suddenly, the ADA giggles, which Regina finds completely absurd. "Your girlfriend might have a problem with that, anyway," she teases. "She might get jealous."

"Emma's not –"

Well, actually, as much as she detests the word, Emma *is* her girlfriend.

"- the jealous type," she finishes lamely.

The infernal woman is still giggling, and Regina feels the sudden urge to slap her. "I don't know about that," she says in an irritating sing-song voice. "She got pretty upset when you were paying attention to Officer Fa instead of her."

Regina rolls her eyes. "If you're trying to sow discord in my relationship, Mary Margaret, don't. It's petty and doesn't suit you."

"Oh." Mary Margaret's lower lip trembles and Regina wonders if she'd been too harsh. "I thought it was sweet."

"You think jealousy is sweet? What kind of absurd romance novels have you been reading these days?"

"No, not the jealousy, just...she always wants to be with you. You're, like, the first person she's ever loved. And you've been so much happier since you've been with her."

"Are you finished?" Regina asks irritably.

Mary Margaret shrugs and takes a sip of water, grimacing as she swallows. "Regina, I'm drunk," she says, as if she's just now realized it.

"I noticed."

"I've never been this drunk before."

"And you probably never should be again."

"But I like it," the ADA whines.

With a long sigh, Regina orders, "Finish your water and then I'll take you home."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean, I want to drink more."

"Well, you're not. The bartender is cutting you off," she says loudly with a meaningful glance at the young man, who gives her a playful salute. "So, like I said, finish the water and I'll call a cab."

"Take me to a different bar, then."

"No, I'm taking you to your apartment."

"You don't know my address," Mary Margaret taunts in such a childish tone Regina half-suspects the younger woman is going to stick her tongue out.

She sighs again, loudly, and the bartender – whose nametag reads "Will" – smirks and brings her a mug of sludgy, disgusting coffee (which she drinks anyway). "Then I'll take you to *my* apartment."

"I don't want to go to your apartment. I want to stay here and drink more vodka."

There is not enough coffee or vodka in the world to make this night less of a disaster. "Not happening."

With a frustrated huff, Mary Margaret exclaims, "You're not my mother, Regina!" and bursts into tears.

And here it is.

"Yes, I am well aware of that," Regina says grimly as Mary Margaret buries her face in her hands. "But I'm almost certain she and I would agree on this issue."

"And how are you so certain?" Mary Margaret sniffles, parting her fingers to glower up at Regina, who hands her credit card to Will and mouths that she's going to pay the ADA's tab.

Regina scowls. Is there any way to get around actually saying it? She has her pride to consider, after all.

Then again, what does she possibly have to gain from pretending to hold an utterly pointless grudge against someone who's just as much of a victim of this as she is?

"Because," she sighs, awkwardly patting the younger woman on the back, "anyone who cares about you would feel the same."

She thinks she sees a ghost of a smile cross Mary Margaret's lips before she resumes sobbing.

"I hated him!" she suddenly yells. "I *hate* him. I still do. He...he was a terrible person. I'm happy he's dead."

"That's understandable," Regina says carefully, and then she stops. There are certain things about Mary Margaret's father that they haven't discussed yet – that she's not sure they'll ever be comfortable discussing – and she's not going to be the first one to bring them up.

"But why am I still sad?" Mary Margaret's voice, usually so sweet and light, has turned nasal and plaintive, confirming Regina's fears of her regression into a whiny teenager.

"Because he was your father?" guesses the detective. "However you felt – or feel – about him, he's still your family."

"I wish he wasn't."

"Well, we all have wishes," Regina replies under her breath. One of hers is to be anywhere but here. "Why don't we see about calling that cab and we can talk about it at my apartment."

She steels herself for a fight – if Mary Margaret's back to her fourteen-year-old personality, then she's got a lot of pent-up drama in her – but instead what she gets is an exhausted sigh from a young woman with the dark shadows of a much older person behind her eyes. "Fine, let's go," says Mary Margaret, slightly wobbly on her feet as she stands and drinks down the rest of her water.

"I suppose there's no chance you'd tell me your address," Regina calls after her, fighting exhaustion of her own as she stares, half-mesmerized,

at the swaying back of Blanchard's head.

The reply comes in a whiny growl. "Don't want to go home."

"Right."

Regina checks her watch and is sorely tempted to down a few shots of her own and then curl into the fetal position on the barroom floor, even though she's successfully avoided hard liquor since that one fateful night with Emma. She's made it through the evening's first trial with her sanity in check, but it's not even six.

Call Emma, the voice in her head chides her as she fumbles in her pocket for her phone.

But she doesn't. Instead, she gives it to Will the bartender and asks him to recommend his favorite cab company.

xx

"Okay," Regina sighs, leading Mary Margaret into her bedroom, "let's get you some pajamas and then you can sleep this off. We'll talk more in the morning."

Putting Mary Margaret to bed at seven is probably the only way she's going to make it through the night.

She eyes the contents of her closet with distaste – there must be *something* in here that she hates enough to allow it to touch Blanchard's skin.

"I can sleep on the couch," offers Mary Margaret. "I mean, it wouldn't be fair of me to take your bed."

"Actually, I prefer to sleep on the couch, so the bed's all yours."

She says it lightly, even carelessly, but Mary Margaret apparently has enough presence of mind to realize that such an admission isn't normal. "Why?" she asks. And then, looking around like she suddenly realizes where she is, she whispers, "Oh my god," and starts crying again, collapsing in desperate, hysterical sobs on the floor. "I'm sorry, Regina!" she babbles. "I'm so, so sorry. It was all my fault."

"*What* was all your fault?" Regina asks tiredly. She's exhausted and emotionally drained and not in the mood for any more sniveling, particularly not about the events that happened in this bedroom. "If

you're sorry for drinking too much, don't be. It happens to the best of us."

"No." A harsh choking sound comes from Mary Margaret's throat and then she bursts out, "It's my fault he came after you...and Daniel and your baby!"

Regina blinks, gripping the bed frame to keep herself upright. The part of her that still has a bit of residual maternal affection for the woman weeping on her floor tells her to immediately reassure Mary Margaret it's not her fault. How could it be? Her father was a vicious serial killer who came after Regina because that's what he did to people. But it's the other part of her – the part that's still filled with rage and despair even after all this time – that replies. "*How* is it your fault?" she growls, eyes flashing dangerously.

"The business card!" cries Mary Margaret. "I – the card you gave me when...you know – Officer Daniel Reeves. That's who it was, wasn't it? I didn't – I never called him, but I kept it in my jacket just in case and...Regina, I'm so sorry! He used to go through my things and – well, I didn't know until later, but he must have found it and...I'm sorry, Regina. Please forgive me."

Mary Margaret is wailing so loudly that Regina can hardly hear herself think, and there's a haze of red in front of her eyes as an unfathomable urge to snap the woman's neck comes over her. Her limbs begin to tremble and she clenches her fingers tighter and tighter around the edge of the footboard, sucking in a deep breath and forcing herself to count to ten with the tiny, tiny bit of sanity she has left that's telling her murder is not a good thing.

"Regina..."

"Don't," she hisses, heart pounding up in her throat so intensely she's not sure if she'll pass out or throw up first.

"Regina, I...I –"

She never actually finds out what Mary Margaret is about to say because suddenly the ADA is clamping a hand over her mouth and stumbling to the bathroom, and Regina feels her body relax, though only slightly, once the other woman is finally out of her presence.

How could Mary Margaret have been so careless?

How is she just finding out about it now?

She hears loud retching from the bathroom and forces her unwilling feet to drag her to where Mary Margaret is kneeling over the toilet, still sobbing as she vomits up an afternoon of heavy drinking.

There's something so sad and pathetic about it.

And something that feels so deserved.

Mary Margaret was fourteen, she reminds herself. *And she didn't know her father was a murderer.*

She knew he was a pretty bad guy! the other part of her brain protests. *It's not like he was Father of the Year to her. Fourteen is old enough to know that bad people do bad things.*

No, Mary Margaret can't be blamed. Mary Margaret was a victim of her father just as much as Regina was.

No, she wasn't. Mary Margaret never had to spend a night covered in her fiancé's blood with a knife to her throat and -

"Stop!" Regina screams out loud, smashing her fist against the tile wall as she fights against the hot tears threatening to leak from her eyes. *Not now*, she begs her traitorous mind. *Please not now.*

Mary Margaret looks up tearfully from the toilet bowl and whimpers, "I'm trying."

"No, not...not *you*," Regina grits out and shakes her head exasperatedly. This entire situation is such a mess. Body on autopilot, she pads across

the room to the other woman and starts awkwardly rubbing her back, a soothing hum coming from her lips before she can stop it.

She deserves to suffer, says the dark and vengeful part of her.

She takes a deep breath and forces it out, hoping the air from her lungs will take her blinding rage with it.

Mary Margaret was a child. A child in a horrific situation that Regina didn't do a very good job of protecting her from. A child who was trying to do the best she could with what little hope she had and made one careless mistake that may (or may not – who even knows at this point?) have had disastrous consequences.

Even if he had found the card...well, it was just speeding up the inevitable. He was always going to track her down.

If she had known then what she knows now...well, she'd have probably hired one of those lawyers her mother always tried to set her up with and sued the entire Boston Police Department.

She might still do that.

"Are you...you're not mad at me?" Mary Margaret sniffs.

"For throwing up? Of course not, dear," she says with a tight smile. *In. Out.*

"You know what I'm talking about."

Regina shrugs and takes another breath, holding it for a good ten seconds before she exhales slowly and mutters, "I was the one who gave you the card in the first place."

There's a possibility that Mary Margaret shares a small portion of the blame for what happened.

But Regina's is certainly much larger.

And both, Dr. Hopper's voice in her head reminds her, are miniscule compared to the actual killer's.

Mary Margaret's eyes are wide and earnest (though still slightly unfocused) as she looks up and says gloomily, "You were trying to help me, and I...I'm sorry. I betrayed you. I think about it every single day, and...I'm so sorry," she repeats.

"'Betrayed' seems a bit strong," Regina forces herself to say, feeling her ire slowly start to dissipate. It's clear that any rage Regina could direct at her has already been matched by years of self-loathing and torture for a single error in judgment.

There's no proof that White had found the business card, or that it had led him to her family.

She just needs to keep repeating that. She won't need time to get over her anger if she never has time to process it in the first place.

This is probably why her years of therapy haven't been fully successful.

"And I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," Mary Margaret mumbles, looking down again. "I...I didn't know how."

"You've been holding that back the whole time?" She's almost impressed at Blanchard's ability to keep a secret – it's not a skill she's displayed often.

"Not the whole time. It took me a while to put it together." Pushing herself up from the floor, Mary Margaret hesitates a moment before looking Regina directly in the eyes in a way that's both impressively brave and infuriating at the same time.

"You don't know that he saw the card," Regina says tiredly. "And even if he did, you don't know that's how he found us. Let's just...I don't know. Let's not speak of this ever again."

"You forgive me?" Mary Margaret squeaks hopefully.

"No, I...I don't know. I don't have the strength or energy to forgive you, so I'm choosing not to be angry in the first place."

"You can do that?"

"I'm trying," Regina sighs. "You can help me by not talking about it anymore."

Mary Margaret stares for about a full minute, then nods. "Okay," she whispers.

Regina turns on her heel and strides out of the room, hollering, "Flush the toilet!" over her shoulder on her way to the kitchen turn on the kettle.

Mary Margaret follows about five minutes later, and Regina pours two cups of chamomile tea before they walk back to the bedroom in silence – a silence that neither of them has the urge to break for a very long time.

Just as she thinks Mary Margaret is finally asleep, the younger woman cracks one eye open and asks, "Regina? Are you still awake?"

"Mhm."

"Before, when you were talking about going back in time –"

"That was purely hypothetical, dear," Regina says sharply, cutting the younger woman off before she can get too philosophical. She's coming out of the emotional phase of drunkenness and entering the thoughtful one, and Regina's not sure she's ready for it. "As you know, time travel is impossible."

"But if you could, would you?"

Regina sighs and shrugs her shoulders uncomfortably. What if she did have the option of going back to a time before the name Leopold White meant anything to her? Would she do it? Could she? Perhaps even a month ago, the answer would have been yes without a moment's hesitation. Now...

"You're happy now," Mary Margaret muses. "With Emma."

There's no point in denying it. "I am." Except on days like to day when everything seems to be falling apart anyway, but at least Emma makes it better.

"Do you still..."

"Miss Daniel?" Regina guesses. She'd be lying if she said she hadn't wondered that herself. "Yes, but..." she almost laughs as she slowly explains, "It's been so long, and so much has changed. I...I can't even picture that life anymore – the life we would have had." Suddenly realizing that she's revealing a lot more than she'd intended, Regina forces her mouth shut and offers Mary Margaret an apologetic half-smile. "It's complicated," she finishes lamely.

"You've moved on?" Mary Margaret breathes, voice tiny and incredulous.

Has she? The demons that continue to plague her mind don't seem to think so, but perhaps her heart does. Because she's picturing Daniel in front of her right now and she still loves him – every shattered bit of her soul aches with love for him – but she realizes with a start that she doesn't *know* him anymore.

And perhaps even more depressingly, he doesn't know her.

Would he still love her? This person she's become, whom her former self probably wouldn't even recognize?

"What about you?" she asks abruptly. "Would you go back?"

"I was fourteen," the ADA replies. It's an answer to nothing and everything at the same time.

Regina sighs and squeezes the hand Mary Margaret offers her. They lie together in silence for a moment, both seeking comfort that perhaps doesn't exist, before Regina feels compelled to make an admission. "I was just thinking," she murmurs, because if there's anyone who will understand this (among people who aren't paid to talk to her, anyway), it's Mary Margaret, "if Daniel were here...if he suddenly came back to life – I mean, if magic really did exist – I don't know if he'd still...if he'd still love me. If I'm still a person he could love."

Once the admission is out, expelled from the depths of her heart with the force of a nuclear explosion, she expects the air to feel thicker, harder to breathe as the weight of her darkest fear comes crashing down. But almost immediately, Mary Margaret sits straight up and exclaims, "Of course he would! Love – *true* love, anyway – that's forever. It could change, maybe, but I don't think it would ever just disappear."

"I'm not who I was," Regina whispers, eyes full of tears, hating herself for every word that slips out of her mouth and makes her that much weaker in the eyes of a woman she'd once convinced herself she's hated. "I'm not – I don't know how to be that person that he loved anymore."

Mary Margaret shrugs one shoulder. "Well, duh," she says with a slight chuckle. "You're different. It was eleven years ago – who doesn't change? Sometimes change can be good: for example, I have much better hair than I did eleven years ago."

That may have been meant as a joke, but Regina can't laugh. "I just...it's hard for me to be confident that he'd love me when I don't...I don't love me."

When, exactly, she wonders, *did their roles shift so drastically that Mary Margaret is now the caregiver?*

It's a strange night.

"Well, you should," Mary Margaret declares, an air of finality in her tone slightly reminiscent of the headstrong, spoiled teen she'd once been (a kind-hearted one, Regina has to admit, but still used to getting her own way). "What happened wasn't your fault. And," she adds with newfound confidence, "it wasn't my fault either. It was *his* fault, and everything that happened after with your PTSD and all of it...that's his fault, too. And you still managed to keep going even with...you know, *everything*. You really *should* love yourself."

"If you ever decide to leave the District Attorney's office, you might consider a career as a motivational speaker," Regina says gruffly, hoping the sarcasm masks the slight quaver in her voice. A few stray tears leak out of her eyes as she turns her face away from the ADA and buries it in the pillow.

It doesn't work.

"I’m serious, Regina!"

"I know. I...I *am* trying. I just – for a long time, I felt like I lost myself," she admits. "But now...I think I'm figuring it out again. Because of Emma."

"No!" Mary Margaret disagrees vehemently. "Because of *you*!"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does! Maybe your feelings for Emma helped you figure it out, but they were *your* feelings. And you were the one who made the first move – that was *your* courage."

"That was whiskey's courage," Regina says wryly. "And how do you know who made the first move?"

Not that she really cares if Mary Margaret knows, but it's a little weird, isn't it?

Mary Margaret rolls over and reaches her hand out to cup Regina's cheeks, staring into the older woman's eyes in a way that feels deeply uncomfortable. "I used to feel that way, you know," she says softly, "after my mother died. I used to ask myself the same question – if she'd still love me. Especially after...you know, all the stuff happened with my father."

"Of course she would!" Regina exclaims. "I imagine she'd be very proud of you, and everything you've accomplished."

Suddenly, Mary Margaret's eyes are scanning the room for anything to look at besides Regina. "Maybe," she mutters, "but she might think I'm an idiot about...well, about some things."

"Everyone thinks that, dear," Regina replies automatically, though her tone is devoid of all animosity, and Blanchard reacts with a sad smirk.

"I should apologize to David, shouldn't I?" she sighs.

"Please do. He's been almost impossible to deal with since you dumped him. And," she adds with as much brightness as she can muster, "you could be happy together."

"I know; I just thought...well, it was stupid."

"He'll understand," Regina yawns. "He apparently came pretty close to being related to Spencer, of all people. And I guess we now know he's just as bad."

Mary Margaret shakes her head, bewildered. "Who knew?" she murmurs. "And who knew *Judge Gold* was an adoption attorney? What doesn't he have his hands in?"

"The moon?" guesses Regina. Then she shakes her head and mutters, "Then again, I wouldn't be surprised if he owns that, too." Her joke – an admittedly terrible one, but still, her audience isn't *that* discriminating – is met with silence, and Regina glances over to see Blanchard in the midst of heavy contemplation. "Don't strain yourself, dear," she says with a soft chuckle.

More silence (Regina wonders if the deep thought has finally put the younger woman to sleep) before Mary Margaret suddenly demands, "He never did you that favor, did he?"

"Not yet. I've been waiting for something big enough to warrant it."

"Wow." Mary Margaret raises her eyebrows. "It's been eleven years. What if he's forgotten about it?"

"He hasn't," Regina says grimly. Of that, she's certain. She can see it in his eyes every time they look at each other. He'd also lost the love of his

life at the hands of Leopold White, and that's not such an easy thing to forget.

Mary Margaret exhales slowly and admits, "I can't think of anything that would even come close to repaying you."

"I can."

It's been floating through her head in quieter moments since this morning. It's a long shot, to be sure, and something that she'd have to fully commit to. She doesn't know if she's ready.

She doesn't know if that matters anymore.

"I'm going to be sick again," Mary Margaret mumbles, leaping out of Regina's bed and stumbling into the bathroom just in time.

Regina falls back against the pillows and sighs, her eyes burning and her chest tight, wondering how much more of tonight she can handle.

xx

Mary Margaret's out cold – *finally* – on one side of the bed while Regina tosses and turns beside her, unable to close her eyes or silence the monsters in her head telling her that she can't sleep until she's finished conquering all of them.

What she'd told Mary Margaret is true: she *is* happy with her life right now. There are days, certainly, when everything is a struggle, but she finally has everything she needs to fight it.

And if she had the ability to go back in time to escape what White had done, to reverse the damage and abandon the person he'd turned her into, she wouldn't do it. Would she?

She thinks about Daniel by her side – about waking up in the morning and going to sleep at night with nothing to fear but the everyday dangers of police work and the inevitable arguments with her mother.

She thinks about excitement for a future that always seemed bright even on the most difficult days, of believing in permanence and the promise that no matter how anxious and uncertain she got, Daniel would always be there to make it better.

She's getting better; she knows she is. She has people to love; she has hope; she has plans for tomorrow. She's slowly reclaiming everything she's lost, but the one thing she'll never be able to get back is her innocence, the belief that everything she's worked so hard to rebuild won't come crashing down on her in a matter of seconds.

That, Leopold White had stolen forever.

She's relieved that he's dead. She's alarmingly gratified that it was her bullet that had eventually done him in, albeit indirectly.

But she still can't fall asleep on her own bed.

Not in the same room where he'd destroyed her life and ripped her soul into tatters so many years ago.

Not beside his daughter, whom she knows – she *knows* – is nothing like him, has nothing to do with him, and had also suffered because of him.

His daughter who had loved her and had never stopped believing in her, even in her darkest moments, who had spent the last decade as a scapegoat for all of Regina's rage and despair with barely an ounce of bitterness and judgment (because she'd apparently spent the whole time blaming herself).

She can't stay here. She can't lie on this bed pretending that everything is okay, that White's death is some kind of happy ending to a story that's been filled with nothing but pain and loss.

She's not sure why she ever thought it would be.

She thinks about Emma and Henry and their messy little apartment full of love and warmth and *family* and she wants to be back there, in the first place in a long time that made her feel that happiness was even a possibility.

But then Mary Margaret twitches in her sleep, a soft cry escaping her throat, and Regina realizes she can't leave. She's not sure if she deserves happiness, but Mary Margaret deserves to have someone with her as she mourns her sorry excuse for a father. Lord only knows she deserves better than Regina, but when the alternative is no one, perhaps the woman responsible for his death will have to do.

"I'm sorry," she whispers to the younger woman's sleeping form, though what exactly she's sorry for is a mystery even to her. She imagines Mary Margaret would understand, though, once she's awake and sober.

Then, feeling like she's being suffocated, she rushes out of the bedroom and collapses against the back of the couch, forcing herself to breathe even as it gets harder and harder.

She can't leave Mary Margaret.

But she can't stay here either.

Suddenly, her eyes fixate on the cell phone that seems to taunt her from the coffee table.

Call Emma, a phantom voice wheedles, *you know you need her.*

But another voice, one that's rational and reasonable and understands more than just fear and pain and comfort, tells her not to – tells her that Emma's good graces only extend so far and she's already taken advantage of them far too much this week. Emma has Henry to care for and more than just Regina's needs to think about.

A phone call at three in the morning would be unwelcome.

She won't do it.

For over a decade before Emma Swan came into her life, she'd handled her bad nights on her own, and she'd survived.

Then again, she hadn't had an alternative.

Face buried in a cushion to muffle the sobs threatening to burst out of her at any second, she decides that she won't call Emma tonight.

She'll prove once and for all that she's strong enough on her own, that she doesn't need a twenty-eight year old to take care of her.

Now if her body would just stop shaking, it might make the act more believable.

"I'm fine," she whispers, as if saying it out loud will somehow make it true. "Everything is fine."

And then she almost starts to laugh in the midst of her tears because nothing could be further from the truth.

She makes herself sit down on the couch and hugs her knees to her chest, digging her fingernails into her calves in the hope that the pain will be enough of a distraction to keep her mind in the present.

In. Out. In. Out. Living room. TV. Sofa. 2014.

It's a slow process, but eventually her breath comes deeper and calmer and her pulse slows. She thinks she may even be drifting off when a loud ringing noise jars her out of it, putting her instantly on high alert until she realizes it's her phone.

It's just the phone.

And it's Emma who's calling.

"Hello," she says breathlessly.

"Hey." Emma's voice – Emma's beautiful, beautiful (and slightly groggy) voice – is in her ear and suddenly everything feels a tiny bit easier. "Did I wake you?"

She doesn't reply.

"Okay, stupid question. The kid can't sleep, either – something about nightmares."

Her mouth and throat are so dry that talking seems impossible. "Imagine that," she rasps.

"And, you know, I was just thinking...well, I thought I'd check to make sure you were okay. And Mary Margaret – she's still alive, right? She sounded pretty bad on the phone."

"Let's see." Regina pushes herself up and pads over to the bedroom, poking her head in just in time to hear a loud snore as Mary Margaret

rolls over onto her back. "Yes, she's definitely alive. She'll have a hell of a hangover tomorrow, though."

"Wait, where are you?" demands Emma.

"At my apartment."

"Oh." Now she sounds confused. "And Mary Margaret's over there, too?"

"Well, she refused to give me her own address, and she obviously wasn't in a state to get herself home, so...yes."

"You're a good person, Regina," Emma says earnestly, and Regina can almost hear her smile on the other end of the phone.

She wonders if Emma can hear her blush. "No, I'm not," she mutters. If Emma could hear her thoughts right now...

"Sure you are. Anyway, how're you doing? You sounded a little shaken up when you answered."

"I was sleeping," Regina lies, hearing Emma's groan in her head before she's even finished talking. "You woke me up; I was just a bit startled."

"Do you want me to come over?" Emma offers, and Regina curses herself for her inability to hide her emotions. There was a time when she may have actually lived up to her Evil Queen moniker, when she'd buried everything so deeply inside of her that she doesn't actually remember feeling at all. It wasn't healthy, Dr. Hopper would be quick to remind her, and she knows he's right. But it was safe.

That was all before Emma Swan came into her life.

She *doesn't* need Emma to take care of her.

Except that she does.

"Of course I want you to come over," she sighs, her voice far closer to a whine than she'd like. "But you can't. Henry –"

"Is awake, and doesn't mind." Her words suddenly sound muffled as she asks, "Right, kid?" and another wave of tears gushes from Regina's eyes when she hears Henry chatter excitedly in response. "I mean, assuming that's okay with you," Emma quickly amends. "I don't want to assume –"

"Henry is always welcome," Regina sniffles. "*Always*. I just...I'll figure out somewhere he can sleep. It's not a problem, but...are you sure this is okay? I don't want to ruin your weekend."

"How would spending time with you ruin my weekend?" Emma demands, and Regina wants to kiss her.

Fifteen minutes feels too long.

"Drive quickly," she orders. "Not too quickly, but –"

"We're on our way," Emma promises before she hangs up.

In the minutes between the end of their phone call and Emma's knock on the door, time seems to stand still as every second brings an increase in anticipation and a decrease Regina's belief that the conversation actually occurred. She checks her call log at least fifty times, staring at Emma's name on the screen and wondering if the other woman had actually promised to come over or if it was just a wishful hallucination.

Because she doesn't feel particularly in control of her mind or body right now, and she's honestly not even sure if she's awake or dreaming, and it wouldn't be the first time her memory has played this kind of cruel trick on her.

But then there's a knock and her mind is raging at her to grab her gun and keep her phone close and look through the peephole first but her body is rushing toward the door and throwing it open and then Emma's arms are around her and she's sagging against her lover's body and sobbing and if

she's ever doubted that everything she's been through was worth it for the opportunity to be with this amazing woman who is far more than she deserves, it all flies away the second Emma's lips touch hers, soft and gentle and warm and possessive all at once.

"Hey," Emma says softly.

"I love you," Regina wheezes, chest heaving from the struggle to breathe, "so much."

Emma loosens one arm so Henry can wriggle into the embrace, and Regina kisses his forehead, and their three bodies seem to melt together as the world fades around them and for just a moment of bliss, every bit of painful reality, both internal and external, is forgotten.

"You came."

"Of course we came," exclaims Henry, sounding almost offended at the idea that they wouldn't have. And then he yawns loudly.

"Are you alright?" Regina asks, cupping a hand over his cheek. "Your mother said you had a nightmare."

"Oh, that." He clears his throat awkwardly, and Emma looks embarrassed. "That was kind of a trick for you to invite us over."

Emma hisses, "Henry!" and her face flushes crimson.

Regina jerks her head up and glares at Emma. "I assume this was your idea?" she demands, arching one eyebrow.

"Do you want us to leave?" Emma asks with her most adorable puppy-dog eyes that cause Regina to relent in an instant.

"Never," she says emphatically and holds them both tighter, "but Henry has to sleep."

"Right. You and I might want to consider it, too."

"My...my couch is available," Regina thinks out loud, fumbling for a moment. She's not sure where she can actually put all of these people; her apartment isn't exactly set up for sleepovers. "Mary Margaret's on the bed, so..."

"Yeah, you probably don't want to snuggle with Mary Margaret, huh?" Emma jokes, causing Henry to shudder.

"I don't even know her!" he protests.

"Okay, so we'll get some blankets and set you up on the couch," Emma says. "Regina, is that okay? Then I guess you and I can snuggle with Mary Margaret."

Regina forces a smirk. "Excellent," she says quietly, taking a few breaths of Emma's comforting scent before extricating herself from the blonde's arms and walking slowly to the front closet. She screws her eyes shut as she opens the door, unaware that she's shaking until Emma's arms wrap around her from behind and the warm, safe body against her back reminds her to exhale.

"Shit day," the younger woman murmurs.

Regina rotates in Emma's arms so that they're standing cheek to cheek. "Would you be at my apartment if it wasn't?" she asks with a rueful chuckle.

With a tiny shrug, Emma lightly suggests, "Maybe it's a sign that you should just get rid of this place," and it takes all of Regina's remaining self-control not to gasp.

"You - you would want me to move in with you?"

"Um...maybe?" stammers Emma. "I - uh...I mean, you pretty much already have. It's only been a few weeks, but...yeah, sure, I guess I'd be

fine with that. I just meant that maybe this apartment is part of the problem, you know? And a new place might be good for you. Fresh start, you know?"

Regina squeezes her eyes shut. She can feel her cheeks reddening in embarrassment at the misunderstanding, and it's more than she can deal with right now.

It's just too much. All of it is too much.

How could such a wonderful morning have turned into this awful of a day?

"We *did* have our first kiss over here, though," Emma adds with a crooked smile, "so I have to admit the place has some sentimental value to me."

"I never figured you for the sentimental type," Regina remarks, grateful for the reprieve.

Emma's hold on Regina's waist loosens considerably as she pulls away to stare at her feet, and she mumbles, "I'm not," so quietly that Regina almost doesn't catch it.

"I love you," Regina whispers, tracing her finger along Emma's jaw-line before leaning in to press a ghost of a kiss against her lips.

"The feeling is definitely mutual." Emma grins and rests their foreheads together, pulling Regina back in so their bodies are flush against each other, and then she grows serious. "I just wish loving you could translate to taking away some of your pain, you know?"

"Emma..."

"I know, I know, you don't need me to take care of you, but I just...*do* you want to move in with me?" she asks abruptly. "It seems like you don't have as many nightmares at my place."

"Emma..."

"It's just – I really don't understand why you still live over here. It's, like, a large and expensively furnished box of triggers."

For just a second, Regina sags harder against Emma's body, allowing the younger woman to support her full weight. Then she takes a deep breath and makes a decision.

"Come with me," she commands, clutching Emma's hand and leading her back through the living room to a door that she's barely opened for the past decade. If the apartment is a box full of triggers, then this room is the biggest one of all, though she's often able to make herself forget it exists. She usually doesn't even come near it, afraid she'll start to panic before she can even turn the knob.

A bit like what's happening right now, actually.

Emma's apprehensive eyes dart between the door and Regina's trembling hand that keeps reaching up to open it before stopping at the last moment and Henry, who's completely passed out on the couch already. He was apparently too exhausted to wait for a blanket, but Regina is half afraid the pounding of her heart if going to wake him.

"Should I open it?" Emma offers. She takes the hand that isn't locked in a death grip and gently rubs Regina's arm. "Whatever's in there, is it...I don't know – scary?"

"No." She gives Emma a quick nod, permission to open the door, and then she immediately closes her eyes as every muscle in her body clenches (including the fingers that are still wrapped around Emma's wrist, she realizes guiltily, but every attempt to loosen her grip is unsuccessful).

She hears a creak from the door as it opens and a sharp intake of breath from Emma a moment later. "Regina," she whispers, "I – is this –"

"It is what you think it is," mutters Regina, eyes still tightly shut to avoid seeing whatever expression is currently on Emma's face.

She wonders, as she often does, whether this is the end – if this is that final deal-breaker, the moment when Emma will realize that the woman she's trying to date is too broken and too crazy and the only thing left is to get out while she still can.

"I couldn't pack it up," she volunteers as an explanation even though it isn't one, a single tear escaping from the corner of one eye. "I tried."

Emma just replies, "I like the wallpaper," and Regina opens one eye in disbelief.

"Yes, I...I thought it was cute," she hesitantly agrees, her voice faint and squeaky as she runs a finger over one of the cartoon horses on the wall. "My father picked it out, actually."

"Definitely seems like a Big Henry selection."

Regina stares and wonders if she's dreaming – if Emma is really standing in the nursery she never got to use, nonchalantly discussing the wallpaper like this room hasn't been a ticking time bomb in Regina's mind and home for the last eleven years.

She's still rooted to her spot by the door while Emma moves through the room, taking in furniture and decorations that are still in the same places she and Daniel had set them up all those years ago. Only the crib is half-dismantled – a souvenir from the last time Regina had decided to move

out. Emma is standing next to it now, one hand tracing up and down the railing slowly and repeatedly like she's in some kind of trance.

"Are you alright?" Regina asks weakly. Not that there's much she can do to help if the answer is no.

When Emma looks up, her eyes glisten and she stares at Regina with a terrifying intensity and longing, as if she's lost somewhere in her mind and Regina is the only one with the power to pull her out. "He would have been a really lucky kid," she says. "I mean, because he would've had you."

"Emma, I don't -"

"I'm sorry." Emma's voice cracks and she looks away, but not before Regina sees her face crumbling and the faint shimmer of a tear trailing down her cheek.

"Emma..."

What is she supposed to say? She's not sure what she expected, bringing Emma into this room, but this isn't it. What the hell is happening? Is Emma about to leave her? Is that what these tears are about?

Damn it.

Please don't let it happen, she silently pleads to any higher power that might be listening.

She wouldn't blame Emma, of course. Honestly, being in a relationship with her is not something Regina would wish on anyone, least of all someone as wonderful as Emma, but she'd thought...

Maybe that was stupid.

Maybe this is finally the end.

She doesn't know if she could survive this being the end.

"Emma, please tell me what's going on," she begs. "I can't - I don't - I'm so sorry I brought you in here. I didn't mean to burden you with my issues. I shouldn't have -"

"No! No, you absolutely should have," Emma immediately exclaims, rushing over to Regina and taking both of her hands. "I'm glad you showed me. I - I just...it's a lot to take in." Then she looks down sheepishly and adds, "I probably don't have to tell you that, though."

Regina looks away, ashamed. "I don't know why I thought this was a good idea."

"You wanted me to understand why you haven't been able to move out?" Emma guesses. "I mean, I'm assuming you meant to imply that not being able to pack up this room is the reason you're still living here?"

"It's stupid."

"It's not stupid. I mean, you could hire movers, but I get it."

"You do?"

Emma shakes her head and admits, "I don't, but please don't think it's stupid."

"I'm trying to move on," Regina explains, desperately trying to help both Emma and herself understand. "I am. And...and maybe I have. I don't know."

"So, bringing me into this room was a way for you to move on? That makes sense. And for what it's worth, I think you're doing an amazing job considering, you know, everything."

"Earlier this evening, Mary Margaret asked me if...if I would go back and time. If that was even possible, I mean."

"Oh," Emma says softly. "Well, of course you would. Wishing it never happened doesn't mean you're not still moving on. I mean, it's not like you're ever going to celebrate about it."

Shuddering, Regina takes a breath and admits, "I said no."

"No? As in, you wouldn't go back?"

"I just...I don't know! I...I guess I always thought that when White died, I'd...I don't know. I thought maybe all of this would be over, that I wouldn't be afraid anymore. But it hasn't changed anything. I'm still...me. I'm still broken. I thought – I just thought I'd feel something different."

"It's only been a few hours," Emma reminds Regina. "Maybe it takes a while to sink in. It's not like you've had a minute to breathe and process it, either. There's kind of a lot of other stuff going on."

"There is," Regina agrees sadly, a sob welling up in her chest. And she doesn't want to deal with any of it. There are times she still thinks it would have been easier if she'd died that night, and today hasn't done anything to erase that. "I was stupid to think his death would somehow improve things," she grits out against the oncoming rush of tears.

"You're not stupid," Emma argues. "It's a pretty natural thing to think. I'd have assumed that, too."

"It's an *incorrect* thing to think." She's been told numerous times that the only possible cure for her is time; she's had over a decade of that and look at all the good it did her. "As I've just proven. Nothing makes it better."

"Okay, you know that's not true. Just because you're not magically 'fixed' doesn't mean you're not getting better. You're talking about it instead of yelling at me – that's a start."

"I don't think burdening you with my problems is a sign that I'm less broken," Regina mutters darkly.

"You're not stupid," Emma repeats, squeezing Regina's hands. "You're not stupid, you're not broken, and you could never be a burden to me. Please tell me you understand that."

Regina nods and swallows the huge lump in her throat. She can't cry, not yet.

"I do, but –"

"No buts."

"Yes buts!" she practically screeches, wrenching one hand away to gesture wildly at the scattered pieces of crib on the floor. "*But* I know that this – this *happiness* you've brought to me – can never last. Every time I allow myself to dream of a future, Emma, something comes along to ruin it. I let myself be happy with you; I let myself get caught up in the way you make me feel, and now...now everything is just crumbling all around me."

"Not *everything*," Emma argues unconvincingly. She sounds as though she knows her words are futile even as they're coming out of her mouth. "I mean, what happened at work was –"

"It's been a week!" Regina hollers. "One week since Locksley managed to convince everyone that I was sane enough to work again, and I just...I completely lost it at the *commissioner* today. And I told him I quit, so that's – that looks great for me, doesn't it?"

"There were extenuating circumstances. I'm sure if you talk to him, you could –"

"That's not how it works," Regina says with a humorless laugh. "Haven't you forgotten. That's what he *wanted*. They've wanted to get rid of me for a very long time. Spencer sat back and let White rape me and – and get whatever information he needed to kill my family, then he hid the tapes to cover his ass, decided to kill three people just for the fun of it, apparently, and *I'm* the one who's going to lose everything! Again!" She's fully crying now, huge sobs in between every other word that shake her entire body. "It's just...it's not fair!"

"I know," Emma murmurs. "It's not fair, and it totally sucks, and I have no idea what to say to you to make it better, but I wish I could."

"You can't always make things better."

"You could have a bright future even without being a cop," Emma tries (uselessly) to point out. "I mean, earlier this summer, you were saying _"

"Emma, just don't! Don't – don't say things you don't understand!"

Emma sighs. "Okay, sorry. What would you like me to say?"

Don't say anything is the first idea that pops into Regina's head, but then she realizes she doesn't want that either. Chewing her lower lip, she forces herself to look Emma in the eyes, with every bit of her humiliating neediness written all over her face, and she whispers, "Tell me you're here, and tell me that you love me."

"I'm here," Emma says immediately, running her thumb over Regina's tight knuckles as if to illustrate her point. "I'm here, and I love you." She punctuates her second statement with a kiss, and then searches Regina's face for approval. "Is that all you need?"

It's all she's allowed to need, at this point.

"For now," she mumbles.

"Well, if it means anything, I'd like to think that I'll be here and love you for longer than just now. Maybe even forever, who knows?"

With that, Regina leans hard against Emma and finally allows herself to shatter. Because a promise (if it could even be called that) of forever means nothing, but at the same time, hearing it come from Emma in this place and at this moment, it means everything. Emma is here, in this room that's a testament to all of the futures Regina imagined and never achieved, and yet Emma herself, by her very existence, is living proof that rising up from hopelessness is possible, and even as Regina is losing control and the waters are rising all around her, as long as she's in Emma's arms, there's still the faintest glimmer of hope – a beacon calling out to her in the distance, a promise that she can reach it she can just say afloat a little longer.

She doesn't reply – she can't – but she hopes the burst of wet, messy kisses she peppers all over Emma's lips says what her words might never be able to.

"I love you," Emma whispers again, and Regina cries against her shoulder, clinging tightly to the one good thing she has left.

It feels like she's been sobbing for an eternity when Emma gently guides both of them to a sitting position, and by the time Regina eventually

fades out of consciousness, she's only aware of Emma's arms around her and Emma's warm breath puffing gently against her cheek.

Finally, she sleeps.

xx

Emma wakes up first, blinking against the light shining in through the windows of an unfamiliar room. Blue walls with little cartoon horses on the border, a crib in the corner...shit. She's all tangled in Regina's arms and the other woman appears to be asleep still, though her lips are twitching and she's whimpering softly like she's having an awful dream.

"Hey, wake up," Emma whispers, nudging Regina lightly before she realizes that might be a bad idea. She's not sure how Regina will react to being awoken from a nightmare – she's never tried it before – and their surroundings will probably be anything but calming. But she supposes it's too late now.

Thankfully, Regina seems more clingy than violent when she eventually comes to. "Emma?" she mumbles sleepily, arms tightening around the blonde's waist as she presses her face against a flannel-covered shoulder.

"Yep – right here. I've got you. We're at your apartment; you're safe. Good morning."

"What time is it?" Regina asks, groaning as she shifts her weight and her back cracks loudly. "And why are we sleeping on the floor? Again."

"That *does* seem to be our M.O.," Emma jokes, trying and failing to inject an air of levity into her voice. "And I have no idea what time it is," she has to admit. "Sorry for waking you if it's, y'know, too early. Maybe we can relocate to a softer surface, though."

Regina gives a soft grunt that seems slightly annoyed, but a bit more good-natured than Emma might have expected. Then she finally notices where they are and her entire face crumbles. "I...I..."

"Apparently we fell asleep in here last night," Emma says quietly. "But...yeah."

Regina's already squirming out of Emma's embrace, hurriedly pushing herself up to standing. "I should check on Mary Margaret," she mutters, already on her way out.

"Regina..." Emma sighs, and then she shakes her head, contemplating all of the various scenarios that could play out this morning and not particularly loving any of them.

Regina is bustling around the apartment, having gone from half-asleep to Energizer Bunny in a matter of seconds, and Emma stands listlessly in the nursery doorway, gazing at *her* Henry asleep on the couch and reflecting on the sad excuse for a nursery – really, it was more of a closet – that he'd spent his babyhood in.

And then she thinks about life and circumstances and the cop who'd saved her life and the woman who's spent the last eleven years mourning him and a baby whose parents had loved him so much but had never even gotten the chance to meet him.

And then, before she even fully realizes what she's doing, she's waking up her own confused kid and hugging him so tight he probably can't even breathe as tears gush from her eyes and he protests in only half-conscious confusion.

She has to pull herself together – she's supposed to be the functional one here.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Henry grumbles, trying to wriggle out of her impossibly tight embrace.

"Sorry kid," she murmurs tearfully. "I just...I really love you."

Henry rolls his eyes as if to say that it's too early for this, but he gamely hugs her back. "Okay, I love you too. Are you being weird because of Mary Margaret's dad? You didn't even know him, did you?"

"No, but –"

They're interrupted by a knock on the door that causes both of their heads to jerk up in surprise, previous conversation forgotten.

"Is Regina expecting someone?" Henry asks, wrinkling his nose. "It's, like...six, maybe?"

"Regina? It's your father!"

"Hey, it's Big Henry!" In an instant, Little Henry is rushing toward the door, but Emma quickly grabs the back of his shirt to stop him.

"Whoa! Kid, this isn't our house. You can't just go answering the door without asking."

"It's her dad, though."

"Henry, it doesn't always work like –" Emma tries to explain, but he's too fast and she's too tired and he's already opening the door.

"Hi, Mr. Martinez," she says weakly, while Little Henry grins up at the man, who seems momentarily confused by their presence. He quickly regains his composure, though, and greets them jovially, especially considering the early hour.

"Emma! Henry!" He wraps each of them in a tight hug before asking, concerned, "I was hoping to find my daughter. Is she here? Is she alright?"

"She's just checking in on Mary Margaret," Emma explains, hoping he won't ask anything further. She's still not quite sure how to explain all of this to Little Henry.

He looks confused again, but he notices the plea in Emma's eyes and shrugs it off. "Mary Margaret's here, too?" he muses. "Seems like a good old-fashioned sleepover."

"Yeah, something like that," Emma agrees.

"Well, no sleepover is complete without breakfast," he says, showing himself unceremoniously into the kitchen. He tuts loudly at Regina's bare cabinets – she's been spending so much time at Emma's that she hasn't had much need to restock. He seems to find what he's looking for, though. Emma watches with interest as he pulls out a jar of rice and starts boiling a pot of water on the stove, humming to himself all the while.

Emma's fairly certain he's doing *something* incorrectly, but she's afraid to comment.

"Daddy?" Regina's voice, hoarse and squeaky, comes from across the room. "What are you doing?"

"Hello, sweetheart. I'm making breakfast."

"Yes, I can see that," she sighs, staring apprehensively at the stove like she's afraid it's going to burst into flames any second. "What I meant was: what are you doing *here*?"

"Can't a father make his little girl some arroz con leche without getting the third degree?"

"You drove three hours in the middle of the night because you decided I needed some arroz con leche at six in the morning?"

"It was your favorite comfort food when you were little," Big Henry argues. He's maintaining the good humor in his voice, but Emma can see that his eyes are starting to grow worried, and she doesn't blame him.

"I don't – need – comfort food," Regina hisses through gritted teeth.

"Darling, I saw the news last night and couldn’t sleep. Do you want to talk about it?"

"What? No, I don't want to talk about it! I'm not in the mood for a heart-to-heart! I want – I want you to call me before coming over here! I want you to not destroy my kitchen. I just...I'm sorry. I know you mean well, but I can't deal with this right now."

Big Henry's face falls and Regina looks like she's about ten seconds away from a complete meltdown.

"Okay!" Emma exclaims, stepping between father and daughter with her hands up. "Let's all just take a breath here. What the hell is arroz con leche and why are we having a nuclear meltdown over it?"

"It means rice with milk," says Little Henry, who had gotten an A+ in fourth grade Spanish.

"Thanks, kid, but I meant it in a more...figurative sense." Emma glances nervously between Regina and Big Henry, wondering which of them is going to implode first.

"Daddy, I –" Regina whispers before her voice cracks and she shakes her head. Almost a full minute later, she croaks, "I need coffee."

"Okay, sit down," Emma orders. "I'll make the coffee. You just...just relax, okay? Does Mary Margaret need anything? I'll get it."

Perhaps she should worry about the fact that Regina sits without a single word of protest, but at the moment, she's just relieved. Regina also doesn't say a single word about Mary Margaret, but perhaps no news is good news on that front.

"I'm sorry," she mutters to Big Henry. "She's just..."

"I know. I shouldn't have showed up unexpectedly; I know she hates surprises. I was just worried – and apparently I was right to be."

"It's been a bit of a rough night," Emma admits. "A rough week, really."

He stares searchingly at her for a minute before turning back to his cooking and saying, "Thank you for taking care of her," so softly that Emma almost doesn't catch it. She grunts out an embarrassed response and quickly focuses her full attention on the coffeemaker.

She *wishes* she could say she's been taking care of Regina, but...well, at this point, there's not much she can do besides make the coffee.

For now, that'll have to be enough.

Big Henry, apparently confident that the rice is cooking properly, wanders out of the kitchen to sit beside his daughter on the couch, absentmindedly stroking her hair. Surprisingly, she lets him. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he apologizes. "I should have called first."

"It's okay." Regina's voice is strained and raspy, but she attempts to smile at her father as she leans against his shoulder. "I love you, Daddy. I'm glad you're here, I just...I wasn't ready for it."

"Seems like there's a lot going on around here."

Regina nods.

"I'd have thought White's death would have been a pleasant surprise, though," he notes, "It must be at least a little bit of a relief for you."

"It's complicated," Regina sighs.

"Because of Mary Margaret?"

"Because – because of a lot of things!"

"Anything you'd like to talk about?"

Whatever response she'd been about to give is interrupted by a shriek from the kitchen as Emma leaps backwards to avoid the runoff of a heavily boiling pot. Regina, who had immediately sprinted into the room with both Henrys at her heels, stops short and shakes her head, half-laughing and half-crying.

"Daddy, what... Is that really how you think you make rice?" she asks, choking out the words in between alternating sobs and giggles.

Big Henry seems surprised. "Oh...I assumed I could just cook it like pasta?"

Practically vibrating with laughter, Regina turns off the stove and sinks down onto the floor, face buried in her hands.

"I thought you said you made that for her when she was a kid," Little Henry says in a disappointed tone. "How did you forget how to make rice? Do you have Alzheimer's?"

"Henry!" Emma scolds. "You can't just ask people if they have Alzheimer's." That, naturally, makes Regina laugh even more hysterically, rocking back and forth in a manner that makes Emma worry that she's completely lost it.

"Actually, I said she liked to eat it when she was a kid. I never specified who did the cooking – it was her grandmother," Big Henry mutters

embarrassedly, placing one hand gently on his daughter's shoulder. "Sweetheart, take a deep breath, okay?"

Little Henry sighs at the stupidity of adults. "You should have just looked it up on Google."

Finally, when Regina's vise-like grip on Emma's hand has apparently helped her regain enough control of herself to speak, she manages to gasp, "Okay, *I* will make arroz con leche if it's so important to you. Just...go to the living room and stay out of trouble."

"Coffee?" Emma offers.

Regina accepts a mug gratefully while her father waves it off, muttering something about blood pressure and shooting his daughter a pointed look that she ignores. Then he shuffles off to the living room like a wounded puppy.

"Can I help cook?" asks Little Henry, hopping from one foot to another impatiently. He's been a remarkably good sport about this whole weekend, Emma thinks sadly, but he's had to witness far more adult drama than a kid his age should probably be exposed to.

"Of course," Regina says with a smile as Emma helps pull her to her feet. It takes a moment of leaning heavily against the younger woman, a few deep breaths with her head rested on Emma's shoulder, before she's

fully back to normal, but then she straightens and asks, "Emma, would you mind making some scrambled eggs?"

Big Henry makes himself useful setting the table (Mary Margaret still hasn't stirred) while they finish cooking, but just when everyone's almost ready to start eating, there's another knock.

"This isn't Mother, is it?" Regina demands, back ramrod straight as she side-eyes the door.

"Doubtful," Big Henry replies. "She had a conference call this morning."

"On Sunday?" Emma asks dubiously.

Whoever's at the door knocks again, and Regina finally deigns to glance through the peephole. Then she groans loudly before giving the door an aggressive tug. "Detective Nolan, do come in," she says with a sigh.

"Are we back to the Detective Nolan thing? I thought you and I were bonding. I brought donuts," he says with a wide, forced smile.

Regina looks him up and down with something that's either fondness or disdain – Emma can't tell, but he shifts his weight sheepishly and stares

at his feet. "You're here to see Mary Margaret." It's a statement, not a question.

"Yeah, I kind of assumed she'd be here when she wasn't, you know, at her place."

"So, now you're stalking her?"

"I – *no*! What the hell, Regina? I just wanted to make sure she's okay."

"Fine. Come in. Feel free to join all of us for breakfast. Emma, do you want to grab another plate?"

David shakes his head in exasperation as he shuffles in, carefully avoiding Regina's eyes. "Oh," he mumbles. "I didn't realize you had company."

"This is why people generally call before inviting themselves to other people's homes."

He looks around the table curiously, eyes searching for the one person who isn't there. "Mary Margaret is...?"

"Still sleeping," Little Henry says. "I don't know why everyone else decided to wake up so early." He illustrates his point with a loud yawn

that makes all of the adults chuckle, mercifully dissipating the tension in the room.

"Have a seat, David," Regina orders, her tone much warmer than before but still highly guarded. "Thank you for the donuts, and your concern for Mary Margaret. I should warn you, though, I don't know how she'll react to seeing you."

"I know," he groans. "I...yeah, I know. I just...I think I finally understand what you were trying to tell me before, and I want her to know. I mean, I apparently had a fifty-percent chance of having an equally terrible father, so..."

"Maybe not the thing you want to say to her when hers just died," Big Henry points out.

Regina snorts and says, "Speaking of fathers, this is mine. He can give you all kinds of tips for winning over hard-to-win-over ladies."

"Are you telling me Cora Mills was hard to win over?" Emma gasps, feigning shock. "Say it isn't so!"

"Tip number one: don't insult her father, even if he's a useless drunk, or a serial killer. Even if she does. Don't defend him, either. You should probably just ask her how she feels and not express your own opinion at any time."

Emma stares for a moment, wondering if he'd meant that seriously. Then she laughs anyway. "Words to live by!" she declares, raising her coffee mug in a toast.

"I'm sure you've never insulted your girlfriend's father. Isn't that right, Emma?" Big Henry asks with a more devious grin than Emma had ever imagined on him.

"No, of course not, sir. I mean, yes, that is correct." Henry guffaws, amused at her discomfort, and then takes a large bite of the jelly donut he's just selected.

"Daddy!" Regina hisses. "Your blood pressure!" Unperturbed, he points to his daughter's coffee mug with a smirk and returns to his breakfast.

David is looking back and forth between Regina and Emma, and then occasionally to the two Henrys, face screwed up in concentration. "Don't pop a capillary," Emma says jokingly.

"So, wait, you two are...you're dating?"

Regina buries her face in her hands and starts laughing again, so Emma's stuck answering. "Yeah, genius, we are."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" David demands, suddenly on the defensive. "You didn't say anything!"

"You are, admittedly, pretty bad at figuring out women's romantic feelings," she muses, causing Regina to laugh even harder.

Looking back and forth between the two women, David complains, "Why do I have the feeling I'm being attacked right now?"

"It's okay, David, I'm just finding out now, too," says Big Henry, although he doesn't look too upset about it, much to Emma's relief.

"I just found out two days ago," Little Henry pipes up.

"We weren't exactly keeping it a secret," Emma grumbles, "but we didn't really want to go around flaunting it at work. Although I guess if you didn't figure it out, the commissioner and IAB wouldn't have, either."

"No, they just kind of muttered something about women and then talked to Locksley in his office for a long time. They were still in there when I drove his kid home – he put Jones in charge of Spencer's arrest paperwork, so –"

"What?" Regina instantly sobers, head jerking up in alarm.

"Relax, Locksley's taking care of it himself. That was a joke," Nolan reassures her. "Though I now realize it was in incredibly poor taste," he adds under his breath at the sight of the senior detective's glare.

Suddenly, they're interrupted by a groggy voice from the doorway. "Regina?" a bleary-eyed and bed-headed Mary Margaret asks, voice husky from sleep, and Regina is on her feet.

"Sorry, did we wake you? Did you take your aspirin? Do you need anything?"

"No?"

"Is that an answer or a question?"

"I...why are there so many people here?" she wonders aloud.

Regina rolls her eyes. "Apparently, they didn't trust me to take care of you. Imagine that." She looks around the room for someone to call out her sarcasm, but Mary Margaret's eyes have fixated on David and everything else seems to fade away around them.

"We'll, um...we'll give you two some privacy," mutters their hostess. "Come along, everyone."

"I have my Wii in my backpack," Little Henry suggests. "We can play those video games you promised yesterday."

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An hour later, Mary Margaret and David have relocated their conversation to Regina's bedroom, and the rest of them moved on from Mario Kart and Little Henry is extolling the benefits of virtual golf to an extremely skeptical Big Henry.

"But the greatest part of golf is the fresh air and sunlight!" he argues.

"And using taxpayer money to get brunch with your friends afterwards," Regina adds under her breath.

"I pay for my country club membership myself," her father says with an offended sniff. "Well, it's mostly your mother's money, but the point still stands. And the council members have clearer heads after some exercise – something you might consider. Have you been on your run this morning?"

"You mean since you came banging down my door at six? No."

Big Henry looks like he's about to start a lecture until he sees the expression on Regina's face. She's lying across Emma's lap with a blanket wrapped around her, much calmer than she'd been last night, but still obviously not herself. "I'm sure my young friend and I can entertain ourselves for a bit if you two want to go running together."

"Do we?" asks Emma, and Regina nods, slowly getting to her feet. "I've got some clothes in my car. Is that alright with you, kid?"

"Yeah, of course," Henry immediately replies, already focused on the game.

"Are you sure?" Emma chews her lower lip, conflicted. She's spent so little time with him already this weekend; she doesn't want him to feel ignored. Then again, he loves Big Henry, and after last night, he totally gets – or she thinks he does – that Regina needs her and –

"Mom, go!" he exclaims. "Then we can make that lasagna for lunch."

"Lunch-sagna?" Emma jokes, and the others make no effort to hide their disdain. "Yeah, of course. I just...yeah, okay." Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Regina studying her, but she brushes it aside. "You'd better

knock before you go into your room," she tells Regina. "I wouldn't be surprised it those two are doing the nasty on your bed."

"That's disgusting, Mom," Henry whines without looking up from his game. Regina looks horrified.

She glares at Emma before poking her head tentatively into the room. "They're hugging each other and crying," she reports. "We'll both change quickly and then get going?"

They're less than a mile in when Emma feels her shoulder start to cramp. She pulls a face but forces herself to keep pushing forward; she's *not* going to be the one to ruin the first calm moment they've had in a day that's felt more like a month. She groans when Regina almost immediately slows, sensing her partner's change in stride."What's wrong?" she asks urgently. "Is your shoulder hurting?"

Emma refuses to stop running.

"It's fine."

"Emma!"

"I don't understand why it's acting up," she grumbles, finally peeling off to the side of the path so Regina can examine her, but that's also a lie. It

probably has something to do with the fact that she hasn't done a single PT exercise in all of the past week's chaos.

Regina sighs and orders her to sit down.

"Here? In the middle of the running trail? Why?"

"On the grass," Regina explains, clearly trying not to sound impatient. "Stop whining so I can make it better."

Emma plops down on the dewy ground, scowling, as Regina kneels behind her and gently presses her fingertips into Emma's shoulder muscles to find the problem areas.

"I could think of a better use for those magic fingers," Emma complains, just for the sake of being difficult. Actually, this is nice; it's almost too nice. She's slightly ashamed that she's so thoroughly enjoying being pampered by a woman who'd been in the midst of a breakdown less than twelve hours ago.

"That can be arranged," Regina replies with a quiet laugh, "although I was thinking we might like to try something fun with Henry. But we can do whatever you want; today is about you."

"Regina," Emma argues, swallowing a slight moan – god, this feels amazing – as the pressure from Regina's thumb finally releases one of the knots in her muscle, "you don't have to, like, repay me for taking care of you last night, if that's what you're trying to do."

"I'm not!" protests Regina. "I just...I love you."

Exhaustion makes her emotional: that's Emma's only excuse for the fact that she's suddenly sobbing in Regina's arms on a damp patch of grass beside the Charles River, apparently set off by nothing more than the idea of someone doing something nice for her.

"Shh...Emma, it's okay, sweetheart," Regina soothes. "I'm sorry if – I know you've been off since I brought you into that room last night, and I'm sorry for dumping –"

"No!" Emma interrupts. Has she been off since seeing the room? She hasn't really noticed – she supposes there's been other stuff occupying her attention – but that might explain a lot. Still, she has to pull herself together before Regina loses it, too. "No, that was – it's just that seeing the room...I was just thinking about what kind of parent you would have been, you know? And then I thought about, like, the kinds of parents kids deserve to have, and how some kids never get the chance to have them, and some parents never get the chance –"

This isn't making it better.

"I guess this case is affecting me more than I thought," she finishes with a sniffle and then wipes her nose on her sleeve. "But you had already figured that out." Regina nods sympathetically, stroking Emma's hair as tears start to trickle from her own eyes. They're the target of more than a few curious glances, and Emma blushes. "We're kind of a mess."

"The couple that cries in public together stays together?" Regina offers, trying to keep things light-hearted.

Emma forces a smile, but it quickly fades as she's back to thinking about the Arendt girls. "I *don't* want them stuck in the system!" she cries. "I don't want them to go through what I went through, and they might. You said Elsa's been having symptoms of anxiety or possibly PTSD, and, like...she's not getting adopted with a mental illness. That just doesn't happen. You know that, right? And then she and Anna could end up getting separated, and who knows –"

"Emma, stop!" Regina interrupts, her face ashen though her voice is surprisingly gentle. "I know. I mean, I don't *know*, but I know...this isn't going to solve anything."

"I just wish you could adopt them," Emma mumbles sheepishly.

Regina pushes herself back up to standing and says, so quietly Emma almost doesn't catch it, "I may have some ideas."

"Really? I thought –"

"I don't know if it will be possible, but I'm going to try. Shall we continue our run?"

Emma nods and wipes away the last of her tears, and Regina offers her a hand up. They cover five more miles in silence with steadily increasing speed, running side-by-side so they can periodically glance over to ensure the other is still there. Regina claims their pace is a new personal best.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> I feel like I'm constantly apologizing for the length of time between updates, but clearly I haven't improved on that front. Anyway, this is the last actual chapter of the story. There is an epilogue coming, hopefully soon, but I'll take this opportunity to say thank you to everyone who's read and reviewed and basically held my hand through this crazily long and intense journey. This fic has stretched my comfort zone quite a bit, and your support has been instrumental to seeing it through. You guys are the best.
>
> Please observe the usual trigger warnings. This chapter is fairly mild in terms of its content, but there are some discussions of rape and some instances of victim-blaming that may be upsetting to some people.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Cora demands, practically screaming, while Regina curls even tighter against Emma's chest.

"Why would I have told *you*?" she shoots back, hard tone just barely disguising the fact that she's near tears.

"Well, you could have told *someone*. If his defense attorney decides to win the jury over by smearing your reputation, it'll be –"

"If I may," Emma cuts in, putting on her most pompous tone even as her eyes dart nervously around the room, "I don't think this is a very productive way to structure the conversation. What's done is done, and I don't think that arguing about something that happened over a decade ago is going to do anything besides get everyone more upset."

Cora, apparently taken aback by Emma's interjection, pauses. Big Henry mouths, "Thank you."

Almost as soon as Neal had come to pick Henry up, Regina had decided she needed to explain the situation to both of her parents before they saw something on the news. It was a good idea, in theory, but Emma is quickly learning that explaining things to Cora Mills is easier said than done.

"Alright," Cora sighs, "let me see if I'm understanding this correctly. Spencer had a tape essentially proving that he had listened in and done nothing while a suspect raped you –" (Regina cringes) "- and they fired *you*? For what? You won a Medal of Valor for that case!"

"They can't fire Spencer if he's already retired," Regina mumbles. "Anyway, they didn't fire me: I quit."

"Because they were trying to force her out anyway!" Emma adds indignantly. Regina elbows her in the chest. "Sorry, I just thought I should clarify."

"I quit," Regina explains through gritted teeth, "because I was sick and tired of the bullshit that I've had to deal with for over twenty years. Why should I continue to work for an institution that's made it clear time and time again how little they care about me? That's what you've been telling me all along, Mother, and it's about time I finally figured it out. You can feel free to say 'I told you so.'"

Cora clears her throat. "I'm not disputing any of that," she says, speaking very slowly, "but the fact is that if you just storm out and quit, they don't have to do anything for you."

"I don't *want* them to do anything for me," Regina insists, and Cora rolls her eyes, pressing one hand to her forehead.

"Yes, you do, you stupid girl!" she exclaims. Emma inhales sharply. "Stop and take one minute to think this through, and you'll realize that things like your pension and health insurance are actually quite important to you!"

"I have savings," Regina mutters, refusing to look her mother in the eye.

Cora snorts. "I know all about your so-called *savings*," she says irritably. "Or did you forget that I'm a financial analyst? Unless you're dead by forty-eight, they're not doing a whole lot for you. Or maybe your were planning to let your Detective Third Grade girlfriend support *you* and a son on whatever peanuts they're paying her these days."

Emma's arms tighten around Regina's middle, and she watches apprehensively as the other woman's face twitches like she's about to start crying. It's not that Cora doesn't have a point – the CEO of Mills Financial obviously knows what she's talking about, and Regina's ability to plan for the future is shaky at best – but tact is definitely not one of her strengths.

"I am perfectly capable of supporting myself," Regina says stiffly, still looking anywhere but at her mother's angry glare. "I do not require your analysis."

"Sweetheart, listen to your mother," Henry pleads. "I know she isn't presenting herself very well right now, but she really is looking out for your best interests."

"And my best interest is what? Bowing down to kiss the Commissioner's shoes and beg for forgiveness? Absolutely not. I owe him nothing. I want nothing. The easiest option is to just sever ties with all of them completely."

"Right – the easiest option *now*. What about in a few years when your sad excuse for a savings account runs dry and you have no means to buy food or pay your rent? What then? Or when you have no health insurance and end up bankrupt from the therapy and medication you're not just going to magically stop needing? How exactly do you plan to take care of yourself? I don't want to read your obituary, Regina!"

"I –"

"Or," Cora continues, suddenly gaining momentum when she sees her daughter falter, "what if by some miracle, everything works out for you, and someday, you decide you want to adopt a child? Don't look at me like that, Regina – I know that's something you secretly want, and it's not impossible. That is, it's not unless *you* screw this up. Do you have any idea how expensive it is to raise a child? Not even counting adoption fees, which are astronomical, they'll need clothes and shoes and good food, and if you want to send them to a decent college, well, you had to start saving around fifteen years ago."

"You don't need to be rich to be a parent!" Regina argues. "Plenty of good parents –"

"We're not talking about *rich*, Regina; we're talking about *stable.* I'm your mother, and I know you," Cora says firmly. "You would not want a child of yours to have anything less than the best you could give."

Regina sighs, defeated. "So...what?" she asks dully. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to march into Commissioner Sid's office and tell him that you will leave the force, as he wishes, with nothing less than your full retirement benefits. And if he refuses, you will tell him that you have a top-notch legal team at your disposal and more than enough material to mount an ironclad discrimination lawsuit and a fairly decent smear campaign against the entire Boston Police Department."

"Mother, no!" Regina gasps, sitting bolt upright and crushing Emma's leg in the process. "I don't want to make a scene about this! Press and courtroom battles and...no. That's the last thing I need. Why can't you see that?"

"You're not going to make a scene," insists Cora. "You're merely going to *threaten* to make a scene so they'll give you what you want."

"You mean they'll pay me off to keep quiet."

"Yes, and that *is* what you want, even if you haven't figured it out yet. I can get some of the company lawyers on it, starting tomorrow – a few of them owe me favors. This will all work out – you'll see. The cards are all in your favor right now."

"Nothing is in my favor right now. Mother, I –"

"You don't need to thank me, dear."

Shaking her head, Regina leans back against Emma and says, "I just want to put this behind me. All of it. I don't want any more Boston Police drama and I *really* don't want a legal battle."

"And if you do what I'm telling you to do, there won't be one!" Cora exclaims. "Maybe a few weeks of negotiations, some signed papers, and then you can wash your hands of this forever. Then you can get another job or adopt a baby or take up gardening – do whatever you want, with at least *some* financial security."

"But if I do it my way, I can wash my hands of it forever starting right now."

"And in five years time? Think about it, Regina. It's about time you started looking out for your own interests." With that, Cora marches out the door, leaving her husband staring helplessly after her.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs. "She just – she does want what's best for you." He gives Regina a soft peck on the cheek and follows Cora out, cursing under his breath all the way.

As soon as the door slams shut, Regina crumbles, burying her face in Emma's hair as the tears finally fall. "What do I do?" she weeps. "Do you think she's right?"

"I don't know," Emma says tentatively, taking Big Henry's words from breakfast to heart and not insulting either of her girlfriend's parents. "What do you think?"

"She doesn't understand!" Regina exclaims. "She just... she doesn't know what it's like."

"No, she doesn't." Keeping her voice soft and soothing, Emma strokes Regina's hair and tries unsuccessfully to rock them back and forth. She's in embarrassingly over her head here.

Regina sniffles, wipes her eyes on her sleeve, and then whispers, "I think I'd rather be eaten alive by an army of spiders than see Commissioner Sid's face again."

"That seems a little extreme," Emma starts to scoff, but one look at Regina's trembling lower lip tells her that her partner (well, maybe her soon-to-be former partner) is deathly serious. "Okay."

"Do you think maybe I have to, though?"

Emma just shrugs, thinking that she may be the last person anyone should consult about this problem. Apart from raising a kid – yeah, it can get expensive – she pretty much knows nothing about anything. And Regina, in a more rational state, definitely knows that.

"I think maybe you don't have to decide anything today," she ventures. "Like, just take a moment to breathe, you know? It's not like BPD is going anywhere."

When Regina wriggles around to face Emma, her eyes are wide and fearful, her face almost childlike in its vulnerability. "What about you?"

she asks softly.

"Me? Yeah, I'm not going anywhere either, but you knew that."

"Just making sure."

Neither of them speaks again for a long time, as their moment to breathe turns into an hour and then several more. Emma is pretty sure Regina even dozes off at some point, but she stays alert, watching the windows and doors for any sign of trouble, a habit of Regina's that she seem to unwillingly picked up.

"I won't let anyone hurt you again; I promise," she whispers, although she's certain the slumbering woman in her arms can't hear her. "I'm going to make sure Henrys' fairytale comes true and we all live happily ever after."

It's a promise she has no business making, but she's going to do everything in her power to keep it. Regina's been through enough; she deserves a happy ending.

They both do.

xx

Regina awakens to a faint buzzing sound from the coffee table and nearly jumps out of her skin before realizing it's only her phone.

"Locksley's calling again," says Emma, and Regina tries to breathe again. Emma's here. She's safe.

She's safe.

She's not sure she even knows what that word means anymore.

Glancing quickly around the room, she assess the situation and decides "safe" is probably an accurate enough description. She's also exhausted, though, and it's more than just a sleep-deprivation, thing. She's tired all the way down to her bones, and there doesn't seem to be much rest in sight.

"You want me to hand that to you?" Emma offers, shifting her weight to reach for the phone.

She can't talk to Locksley. He'll either be horribly concerned or yell at her, and at this point, she's not sure which would be worse. "Let it ring,"

she sighs. "I'll text him later.

Emma frowns. "You sure?" she asks dubiously. "I mean, I feel like he'd be the type to show up here and bang the door down." But she reluctantly follows orders, drawing her arm back and wrapping it around Regina's waist. "You tired or something? I think you fell asleep for a little bit."

"I feel like I could sleep forever," Regina admits, stifling a yawn.

"Well, you've got about ten hours if we decide to go running tomorrow morning, and eleven and a half if we don't. Is that enough time for you?"

Regina rolls her eyes and twists onto her side so she can wrap an arm around Emma. "I'm sorry for making you deal with this," she murmurs. "I only wish –"

"I love you," interrupts Emma. Regina sighs and kisses the younger woman on the cheek. For once, she doesn't have the energy to question whether it's true or not.

She has much more important things on her mind.

"Do you think she's right?" she demands. "My mother, I mean. About talking to Sid and...and all of it."

Emma grimaces. "Honestly, I have no idea," she says sheepishly. "The whole thing is kind of above my pay grade. But it sort of sounds like you do."

Eyes squeezed shut, Regina presses her face into the curve of Emma's good shoulder and whispers, "Yes, but I don't want her to be."

Just the thought of Sid's face looming above her again makes her want to crawl into a dark hole and never resurface. She doesn't even want to consider the conversation.

"Well, think of it this way," Emma suggests, "you really have nothing to lose at this point."

"How do you figure?" she asks, slightly confused. As shitty as this week has been, she's fairly certain she still has *something* to lose – namely, the woman whose arms are currently holding her and whose child she's come to love as her own.

"I mean, you've already done the storming out and quitting thing, so you're already in your 'Worst Case Scenario' and whatever dire financial straits your mom thinks you're in –"

"They're not *dire*," Regina interrupts. "They're simply not what she would wish for herself. My mother clawed her way from poverty to

Forbes, but she seems to have forgotten somewhere along the way that a middle ground exists. There's also no reason I wouldn't be able to find supplementary employment if my savings prove inadequate. I certainly won't be asking you to support me on your Third-Grade Detective's salary – not that I think you'll have that rank for the rest of your life."

"Well, there you go," says Emma, the faintest of blushes creeping onto her cheeks at the compliment. "You're already doing fine, and whatever you can get out of Sid will only make things better. Like I said, nothing to lose."

"Except my dignity," Regina mutters. Although she supposes that as far as BPD is concerned, that's already long gone.

Emma ignores the remark. "But for the record," she continues, "I wouldn't mind supporting you, if that's what it came to. I mean, my salary's not as low as your mother thinks it is. It's not like we'd be living in a refrigerator box eating nothing but canned beans."

"I know," Regina replies, forcing a chuckle. "And thank you."

She's about to say something else when her phone vibrates. Groaning loudly, she wriggles out of Emma's arms enough to reach it, and she groans again when she looks at the screen.

"Locksley again?"

She gives a brief nod before declining the call and writes a brief text: *I'm fine.*

"That'll really convince him," Emma says sarcastically.

Regina rolls her eyes. She'd like to make some scathing remark about how it's not Locksley's business to be convinced, but it's really not fair. He's done nothing to warrant her anger, but it has to go somewhere.

"It'll have to," she says with a grunt, shifting her weight back so her body is as flush against Emma's as possible. "I don't want to deal with anyone but you for the remainder of the weekend"

"Some weekend," Emma grumbles. "Apart from Henry's book, it's not really one I'll want to remember."

Regina nods and glances at the book, set in a place of prominence on her coffee table. The one bright spot on what's otherwise been a whole lot of darkness. "I just want to forget this weekend," she mumbles, "and this case, and basically everything that's ever happened in my life."

Maybe she's being a bit melodramatic, but every time her mind drifts to Spencer or White, she starts to feel nauseous and light-headed, and she just doesn't want to deal with any of it anymore.

"That bad?" Emma asks, surprised. "I'm sure you've got a couple of decent memories you'd like to hold onto."

Swallowing, Regina clutches Emma's hand and whispers, "The ones with you and Henry." *And you wouldn't have those memories without all of the terrible ones*, the needling voice in her head points out.

And it was worth it, she reminds herself. *Everything was worth it for Emma.*

But that doesn't make it hurt less.

Emma hugs her tighter and presses a soft kiss onto her hair, and Regina feels crushed under the weight of this pure and innocent love she certainly doesn't deserve.

She feels dirty somehow, unworthy of the expectations that are suddenly piled over her, the burden of being loved without being lovable, and she needs to get out of Emma's arms before she ruins everything.

"I have to get clean," she mutters, scrambling off the couch with a newfound energy she didn't know she had in her and dashing to the shower.

Emma follows slowly, her voice tentative and confused as she asks, "Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?"

Regina tears her clothes off her body and dives behind the shower curtain as fast as she can, eyes carefully averted from Emma's gaze and the mirror, both certain to hold accusations of how absurd she's acting. "I'm fine," she growls, voice tight with fast-approaching tears as she fumbles with the faucet. Finally, when she feels the relief of warm water cascading down on her skin, she manages to take a breath and assure Emma, "It's not your fault. I just need a minute."

"We talked about this," Emma accuses from the other side of the curtain. "We talked about letting me take care of you."

"I said I need a minute!" Regina says through gritted teeth. "I'm quite capable of showering on my own."

We talked about not needing you to take care of me, she thinks irritably, rolling her eyes when, instead of footsteps, she hears a loud clunk as Emma sets the toilet seat down and most likely sit on top of it. Not that she's angry at Emma. In fact, she remembers with a feeling of dread, the main take-away from the conversation had been for her to stop lashing out at the person who's hurt her the least. "Emma, I – I'm sorry," she stammers, eyes filling with tears. "I don't know how to make everything alright."

"S'okay," she hears, though the sound of Emma's voice is garbled over the rush of water in her ears. "You still capable of showering on your

own?"

Regina leans against the cool tile wall, not sure of anything anymore. Apparently concerned by her silence, Emma pokes her head in and asks, "Really, you okay? It's okay if you're not."

One shake of her head and Emma's instantly stripped and in the shower with her, holding out her arms until Regina finally gives in and collapses against her as the tears start to fall. "I can't do it," she cries. "I can't look at his face again – at *any* of them. I just... I want it to just go away."

"Well," Emma muses, hands running up and down Regina's shaking back, "we could find some remote cabin in the forests of Maine or Vermont or somewhere and just live off the land. Forage for fruits and berries, Henry could have a pet coyote –"

"Emma!"

"Sorry – not a joking matter," the younger woman quickly apologizes. "I just...I'm here, and I love you, and whatever you need – even if it's someone to yell at – I've got you."

Regina sighs and watches her tears mix with the hot water as they trickle down Emma's chest, feeling horribly guilty. "I love you so much. And I don't – I can't imagine how I could get through this without you."

"Well, good thing you don't have to," Emma replies as if it's the simplest thing in the world. "Seriously, I'm not perfect, but I'm here, and I'm not leaving you."

Regina doesn't reply – she can't – but she hopes her silence says all of the things she means it to. She gently sways their bodies and allows herself to bask in the *right*ness of holding Emma, to marvel at the way they almost feel like part of each other, one and whole no matter how things fragment around them.

"You mentioned getting clean," Emma suddenly recalls. "You need any help with that?" Smiling through her tears, Regina gives in, feeling a strange kind of strength pour into her as Emma's fingers gently massage her scalp. "You're going to get through this," Emma whispers, and Regina thinks that maybe she will.

xx

Emma is icing her shoulder when she walks into the station on Monday morning following an epic struggle to get through a couple dozen reporters, glum after being told in no uncertain terms by her physical therapist that she'll never be able to regain the strength that she'd lost if she doesn't do her exercises regularly.

"Running doesn't count," he'd lectured. "It only uses your legs." And she, of course, had scowled and tried to prove him wrong by trying to lift a weight she'd had no business attempting. She's never been one to take criticism well.

"Swan!" Locksley calls, shaking his head at the sight of her. "What happened?"

"Slight PT mishap," she mutters, avoiding his sure-to-be-judgmental eyes as she follows him into his office.

Luckily he doesn't press the issue, but his next question is even more uncomfortable: "Is Mills with you?"

"Oh, um..." She's not quite sure how to put this – she'd assumed that Regina would have called Locksley to explain her flat-out refusal to ever set foot in the station again, but apparently she hadn't. "Here's the thing: Regina seems to think that during the mess formerly known as Saturday, she told Sid that she quit, and...umm... I guess she meant it?"

Locksley groans and slaps a hand to his forehead, muttering, "Fuck."

"You want me to call her and tell her to come in?" Emma offers desperately, hoping she hasn't just set a storm in motion. "She's not, like.... I mean, she's okay. Just...yeah, really doesn't want to."

Sighing loudly, Locksley shakes his head. "I should have guessed," he mutters. "We don't need her today. We might tomorrow, but I'll just... I'll call and sort this out. There's actually some other important stuff I need to talk to her about. If she'll pick up the phone."

"I think she will," Emma ventures, though she's cautious. "She's, like, a lot better today than yesterday. But I think she was upset about some of the things the commissioner said to her. Which is understandable, because they sucked."

He sighs again. "I'll call him first, then. And then Regina. And just... look, if you need to disappear at any point today... well, you know. Regina is... I worry. Free time hasn't always been her friend."

"Neither has the job," Emma counters.

"Fair enough, but you didn't know her back when things were really rough. I mean, in the early days, the job was pretty much the only thing getting her out of bed in the morning." After a short pause, he half-smiles and adds, "Now, thankfully, she has a few other things."

Emma looks at her feet – not that it does much to hide her blush – and mumbles, "So, should we stop gossiping and get to work?"

"Yes, that's an excellent idea," Locksley replies, checking his watch. "Actually, there's a lot to get done today. I'm going to need all of your paperwork from this case – IAB is taking over the investigation, as you

might have guessed, so dot your I's and cross your T's and all of that. You, I'm not worried about, but...well, I'm sure you know."

"I get it."

"Great, let me know if you need anything," he says brightly, and Emma ambles back out to the squad room, where she sees a strangely peppy Nolan, sitting with his leg elevated and periodically giving a stupid little smile as he glances at his phone.

"What's wrong with you?" she wonders aloud as his phone beeps again, and then she realizes. "Is that Mary Margaret? How is she?"

Nolan shrugs. "She's good, I guess, considering. How's *Mills*?"

"Same," she answers, sitting on her chair with a thud. "This weekend was... well, you know."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

They start to work in companionable silence for a few minutes before Emma suddenly remembers. "Are *you* okay?" she demands. "I mean, with the whole long-lost dead twin thing you had going on?"

"My Locksley-mandated therapy sessions are going pretty well," he says dismissively. "Hopper's got me processing all my feelings and that junk. I don't know. It's fine, I guess. I'm dealing – I think we all are."

"What do you think is going to happen?" Booth asks as he walks in, gesturing at the empty desk across from Emma. "Is Mills done?"

"Can't really imagine working here without her," Nolan muses.

Emma tries to hide a smirk. If only she could record this – as serious as things are, Regina would probably get a huge kick out of it. "She'd probably tell us to shut up and get the paperwork organized so Lucas can put away that son of a bitch."

"Copy that," agrees Nolan.

xx

"Mills," says the voice at the other end of the phone.

"Locksley," Regina sighs, dropping a pan of grilled vegetables on the counter and sitting for what she assumes is going to be a long and intense conversation, "hi."

"Hi." There's a long pause, and then he tiredly remarks, "You're not at the station."

"Remarkably astute observation. It's almost like they pay you to solve crimes."

"Regina..."

"Look, I'm not about to throw myself out the window, if that's why you're calling," she growls before feeling badly about it. "I know Saturday was... Robin, I'm so sorry. I just... I can't."

"Swan says you're fine, and I trust her," he replies, ignoring her apology completely. "Although if that's the case, you might have considered calling in sick."

Regina buries her face in her hands for about thirty seconds before she can speak again. "Did Commissioner Sid not pass on the news that I quit?"

"He may have mentioned that," Locksley says carefully, "but I don't think it he believed you were serious about it. Given the fact that you've spent the past decade stubbornly refusing to quit, it was –"

"That was before he told me it was my own fault that a suspect raped me while my partner listened in and did nothing about it!" she exclaims, fingers clenching the table as she rides out the tightening of her chest and the sharp pang in her stomach that come with saying the words out loud.

Robin is silent for a moment before he sighs again and mumbles, "I'm sorry."

"I don't *want* you to be sorry. I don't care if you're sorry; I don't care if White's dead; I don't care if Spencer is in jail. I just – I just want to be okay for once!"

"So when Swan told me you're fine, she meant fine with an asterisk?"

"Why is that what you're fixating on?"

"Because you're my friend, and I'm worried about you!" Locksley exclaims. "Because you've just had about twenty-five bombshells dropped on you all at once, and I can very easily remember a time when even one of those would have had you on the floor in the fetal position, and – and you're not here and you're alone in your apartment with nothing to do, and I just worry. And I'm sorry, because I know you don't

– it's not that I don't think you can handle – this isn't coming out well, is it?"

Regina rolls her eyes and briefly wishes he could see her face so he'd know in no uncertain terms how she feels about his *worry*. "Yes, I'm fine with an asterisk," she concedes. "I'm... well, you don't have to worry that I'm all alone with nothing to do. I'm cooking – actually, would you like to come over for dinner? With Roland? I'm making –"

"Regina!"

"I'm not going back to the station, Robin. I was very serious about quitting."

She hears a soft growl on the other end of the line and pulls her feet onto the chair, hugging her knees to her chest. Strangely, she's not finding any joy in frustrating Locksley today, and she wishes she knew how to stop.

"I talked to Sid this morning," he suddenly blurts out. "Apparently he's received some strongly worded constituent feedback, not to mention a couple of threats."

"Damn it," Regina mutters. Her mother works fast when she sets her mind to it.

"They're willing to give you early retirement," he says. "Full pension, benefits, everything –"

Really? Regina thinks derisively. "Provided I keep quiet about the tapes?"

"I don't think there are any catches," Locksley mutters distractedly, and Regina thinks she can hear him shuffling through papers on his desk. "You do have to come in at some point and fill out the paperwork, though."

"There's always a catch with these people. Well, maybe not for you, but for me."

"I know, but in this case... well, first of all, I don't think you *can* keep quiet about the tapes, because Lucas is definitely going to ask you to testify against Spencer, and I think a few details have actually already been leaked to the press, if the number of reporters outside is any indication."

"Oh," Regina says softly, twitching as a tiny shiver runs down her spine.

"I'm sorry," Locksley tells her for the second time, and Regina sighs. Maybe he was right: maybe she's not strong enough to deal with this.

"If you just called to apologize multiple times, let's hang up now. I have another bag of vegetables that won't peel themselves."

"Well, um...there is one other thing," he says nervously. "It's...um....well, Sara called this morning."

"Sara?" Regina demands, instantly on edge. "As in, Elsa and Anna's foster mother?"

"That's the one."

"Why did she call you? Is everything okay? Are the girls –"

"The girls are alright," Robin immediately reassures her. "They're doing well. Everything is fine, but -"

"If you have to say 'but,' then everything isn't fine."

"No, it is! But there's been - there's a potential adoptive family."

Regina's heart drops to the pit of her stomach, and she hugs her knees tighter, wind knocked out of her chest. "Oh. That's... that's wonderful."

Isn't it? But if it's so wonderful, then why the hell is she about to cry?

"Not really. The family actually just wants to adopt Anna, so that would mean Elsa –"

"No!" Regina exclaims, immediately on her feet. "They can't do that, can they? They're supposed to be kept together; the social worker said –"

"Yeah, she did. And that's obviously the goal, but the problem is –"

"They can't do that!"

"Right. They're trying to keep them together, but unless they get another offer... Regina, it doesn't look great."

No.

No, this can't be happening.

"They'll get another offer, then," Regina growls into the phone. That, she's confident about. Whether or not they'll accept it – that's a different

story.

"Maybe they will, but I don't know if –"

She hangs up on him. He'll thank her later. For now, she turns off the oven and starts fumbling through her closet. What's the appropriate dress code for cashing in on an eleven year old favor?

Nothing she owns, most likely. With a heavy sigh, she pulls her phone back out of her pocket and gives it a hard stare. She'd really prefer not to humble herself any further, but perhaps, in this case, the end result will be worth it.

It rings once, then twice, and then, "Regina? Darling, why are you calling at this hour?"

xx

The clack of her heels against linoleum is deceptively sure and steady as Regina makes her way down the seemingly endless hallway to Judge Gold's office. She's allowed her mother to dress her for this appointment: high heels and pearls and a suit that's probably worth more than the rest of her wardrobe combined (and unlike certain co-workers,

she doesn't dress like a slob). Her hair has been professionally styled and her make-up checked three times to ensure that there are no chinks in her armor. As long as she doesn't melt to the floor in a puddle of nerves, she looks every bit the confident businesswoman.

She's here to make a deal.

"Good morning, Judge Gold," she says briskly, channeling the cool self-assurance of Cora Mills. There's no reason to be afraid: he's the one who owes her. "I'm here to collect on that favor."

"About time," Gold replies, barely looking up from his file. "I've been following the news reports of Leopold White's death; apparently, the pneumonia that did him in was exacerbated by his paralysis. If you're facing charges –"

"What? No, of course not. This is – this has nothing to do with *that*. I'm here to ask you about connections from your previous job."

He stops reading, suddenly intrigued. "Oh?"

It's now or never. Regina inhales and counts to seven before letting it out, steeling herself for whatever comes next. "I need a child, Gold, and I need your help," she finally says.

Barely missing a beat, he smirks and replies, "Well, I'm flattered, but uninterested."

"Not like that!" With an impatient scowl, Regina explains, "If you've been following the news about White's death, I'm sure you also saw the story about Albert Spencer and the Arendt family."

"I've read several articles about what happened, but I have to admit that I'm still slightly puzzled by the connection between the two."

"As far as I know, there isn't one," Regina says, sighing. "He found a random family and a woman who wanted to kill them just to make some noise so he could –"

"Show the city what atrocities their tax dollars were funding?" Gold guesses, and Regina crosses her arms tightly over her middle as her face heats up. "Now, I'm a criminal judge, as you know, but even I can tell you that you have grounds for a lawsuit and then some. But you said you're here about a child?"

"Yes. Well, actually, two children," Regina quickly amends. "The Arendts' two girls, Elsa and Anna. No living relatives that anyone knows about, so they've both become wards of the state. There's a family that wants to adopt one, but not both, and..."

She stops, realizing she's babbling.

"Given that they're siblings, Children's Services will prioritize any adoptive family that wants to keep them together," Gold muses, "as I'm sure you know. And if I'm reading between the lines correctly, *you* would like to be that adoptive family."

"Yes, very much."

He regards her quizzically but non-judgmentally. "You've thought this through?" he demands. "Motherhood is challenging even in the best cases, and this-"

"I've thought it through. I've thought about nothing else." It's a non-answer, but Gold doesn't call her out on it, and she's grateful. There's a much more difficult conversation coming up.

"And you need my help because..."

And here it is. "In order to adopt them, I need to be approved as a foster parent. I've been denied in the past."

"Single woman, long and unpredictable working hours, currently being treated for a mental illness – can't imagine what would possibly put them off of you."

"One of those conditions could change," Regina mumbles, carefully not mentioning which. Not that she needs to.

Gold sounds almost interested when he says, "Being a retired cop could work in your favor," tapping his pen against his chin. "And with references, a statement from your doctor...this may yet work out."

Regina wonders if she's heard wrong. "Really?" she breathes, voice squeaking.

"Well, it hardly a done deal, of course, but yes, I think you've asked at the right time. A former colleague who owes me something has just gotten a promotion. I believe a favor could be called in."

Just as Regina feels she might faint from happiness, Gold suddenly asks, "Just out of curiosity, and because it will probably come up during the process, why is this so important to you? Why these girls?"

"I...I'm not entirely sure," Regina confesses. She'd rehearsed this particular speech with her mother countless times, but all of her talking points fly out of her head the second she pictures Elsa and Anna's faces. "I just feel a connection to them somehow, maybe because of the case, or because I found them. Maybe because of what they've been through. I think in some ways, my experience with PTSD could be an advantage: because I can relate, because I've learned how to cope throughout the years. I can help them lead happy and healthy lives in spite of everything. That's what I want – I want to make them happy. And I – I love them," she finishes quietly. This part hasn't been practiced, but

right now it feels like the only thing that's important. "It feels like we belong together."

Gold stares hard at her for a moment and then turns back to his case notes. "Fill out the paperwork again and re-file it," he commands. "Get your references together. I assume you'll want to expedite the process, of course, to get the girls in a stable home as soon as possible?"

"I...yes, sir," she replies, dumbfounded.

"I'll make a few phone calls," Gold promises. "I can't guarantee anything, but I'll do my best."

Regina briefly feels the urge to hug him. Instead she just says, "Thank you, sir," and leaves before he can see her face practically explode into a grin.

She's not great at hiding her emotions. She's not the businesswoman she was always supposed to be.

But she might be a mother.

xx

As soon as Jones and Booth leave for lunch, Emma mumbles her apologies to Nolan and slips into the break room, locking the door behind her. Regina's text - *Met with Judge Gold.* – has had her confused and on edge for the last hour, but she can't risk addressing it with the two nosiest detectives on the force breathing down her neck.

Regina picks up on the second ring. "What do you mean, you met with Judge Gold?" Emma demands immediately.

"Hello to you, too," says Regina, and Emma thinks she hears the faint clank of pan against stove in the background. "Are you having a good morning? Any new cases?"

"Regina!"

"I have to say, retirement hasn't been incredibly relaxing so far, but I've managed to get a start on dinner. Do you like –"

"Tell me about Judge Gold!" Emma exclaims. "Or do you somehow get off on torturing me?"

"Now, there's a thought," Regina says, with a wicked cackle that seems a bit forced. Then her tone instantly grows serious. "The meeting with

Judge Gold was, as you could probably have guessed, about Elsa and Anna. I don't know if Robin told you, but –"

"The separation, yeah. What did Gold say?"

"Gold's previous background was in family law, and he still has a few connections. The favor he owes me –"

Emma's too excited to wait for her to finish. "So you're going to adopt them?" she says eagerly, almost forgetting for an instant to keep her voice down. Not that she's shocked, of course – well, maybe a little.

Regina chuckles nervously. "Not yet, and nothing is set in stone. He just promised that they'd fast-track the application and maybe overlook the whole PTSD thing if Hopper signs off on it." She clears her throat and adds in a tone barely above a whisper, "I don't know if he would, but I have to try."

"He will!" insists Emma. "He has to. I mean, I know you've been going through a tough time lately, but it's not like you're a danger to the girls. And you *do* have a pretty solid support system, whether or not you want to acknowledge it. You know I'd do anything to help, and your parents probably would, too. And the money situation –"

"Is taken care of," Regina mutters. "And perhaps with minimal groveling and threats."

"Awesome. So, what's the deal?"

"Basically, I fill out the standard foster parent application materials, Gold pulls a few strings, and we hope for the best," explains Regina, voice wavering slightly. "When he said it, it sounded a lot more –"

Emma interrupts before Regina's confidence can spiral down any further. "I'm sure Gold pulling a few strings is a determining factor," she points out. "It's probably much more big and impressive than you're making it sound."

She hears Regina exhale at the other end of the phone. "Right."

"But we should probably hold off on popping the champagne just yet, right?"

"That would probably be a wise choice," Regina replies. "I still have to compile a set of references, fill out the application, talk to Dr. Hopper about... well, about a fair number of things – he's called me three times this morning and I just –"

"Okay, so why don't you take care of one thing at a time," Emma suggests. "Like, the easiest thing. Ask Locksley to be one of your references. Call him now; he'll definitely say yes."

There's a moment of silence at the other end of the line, and then Regina asks softly, "What about you?"

"Wait, me?"

"Will you be..." Regina's voice trails off, and Emma feels like smacking herself. She supposes her only excuse is that she's never been asked to be anything by anyone before, but she still should have guessed.

"Of course!" she practically shouts, beaming with excitement. "There you go – one reference down. Now call Locksley. I only have ten minutes left of this lunch break and there's something I need to take care of."

"Should I be worried?"

"No, not at all," she laughs, even though her palms are starting to sweat just thinking about it. "I'll see you tonight? Text me whether you want to go to your place or mine. Oh, and I'm super proud of you. Love you!"

She quickly hangs up before Regina can comment on the fact that she's speaking too quickly and breathing too shallowly all of a sudden. She's not sure what the hell her problem is – it's just *Neal.* If Regina had enough courage to face down Judge Gold for what she wants, Emma can absolutely talk to her overgrown puppy of an ex, right?

"Hey, Em," Neal says distractedly. She can hear some kind of seventies rock in the background - possibly the Rolling Stones, but there's a lot of honking to drown it out - and deduces that he must be driving. "What's going on?"

She takes a deep, rattling breath and asks, "Do you have a free minute? Or several?"

"Yeah, sure, just driving back from a lunch date."

Why the hell is he driving in New York? she wonders, but for some reason that's not what she latches onto. "Lunch date?" she demands, suddenly curious. "What's that all about? You're seeing someone."

"Correction - I saw someone. This is the first time, but it might happen again. Her name's Tamara."

Tamara from the gym. She thinks she remembers Henry mentioning her once or twice, but it was a while ago. "Nice. You finally asked her out?"

He sounds almost a bit pompous when he replies, "Actually, she's the one who asked me."

"Wow. Awesome."

"Yeah, she's pretty great," he says quietly, voice so full of admiration that Emma can tell, even over the phone, how head-over-heels he is for her after only one date. It's great. She's thrilled for him - he's finally found someone.

He's finally gotten over *her*.

"Right, so, here's the thing." Clearing her throat, Emma decides to just get right to the point. "I, um... see, the reason I'm calling is that I kind of want to revisit the custody arrangement," she finally bursts out.

There's a pause, then a fairly unperturbed "Ooookay" as if he'd been expecting this. "How should we change it?"

"I don't know," Emma sighs. "I just... I feel like I'm missing out on a lot, you know? And I know my job has shit hours and that's why we made this arrangement in the first place, and I know... I mean, I don't want to take him away from his friends. Or, like, girlfriends if he's there yet. Or boyfriends if he's into that. I don't even know what he's into! And now I feel like I'd be the last to know if -"

"Okay," Neal interjects, "calm down. First of all, if Henry was into boys, you'd probably be the *first* to know."

"Why? Because I'm gay?" she shoots back. This is suddenly going all wrong, and she's not quite sure why. Why are her hands so clammy? This is just Neal - this is -

"What? No! Because you're his mom. Of course you'd know if he had a boyfriend - or a girlfriend, for that matter. Although, for what it's worth, I don't think he's really interested in either at this point."

"Right, so I'd be second to know."

Neal groans. "Emma, chill. I'm not a better parent than you," he says tiredly. Great, now she's pissed him off. He's never been a fan of dealing with her insecurities - not that she blames him. "I may be the more reliable one, but that's only because of my job. We're both doing the best we can with what we've got, so just... just cool it. Henry loves both of us. Henry *needs* both of us."

She blinks once, and then a second time. Is he saying what she thinks he's saying. "Wait, do you mean -"

"Yeah, you're right. We should rethink the custody situation. I mean, it's pretty obvious Henry misses you - he's constantly asking for extra weekends. It'll probably never be ideal, especially with us in separate cities, but I'm open to suggestions."

Feeling as though a huge weight has been lifted off her chest, Emma sinks back into the sofa cushions and grins. "There's no chance of you

moving back to Boston, is there?" she teases.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Okay, the thing is, Henry's getting older," she reasons. "I mean, old enough that it wouldn't be the end of the world if he had to spend a few hours on his own, right?"

"Right. I've been telling you that for almost a year. You're the one who insisted on -"

"Look, I see kids get killed on a regular basis. I can't help it if I worry. But, there's also another thing: Regina just - well, Regina is most likely retiring soon...ish. So, like, she'd be around if something came up for me and he had an emergency. And I know you don't know her very well, but I trust her and Henry does, so -"

"She makes the kid eat vegetables. She gets a gold star in my book."

"Right, so... anyway, the point is my situation has changed. Slightly."

Neal whistles. "This thing between you and Regina is pretty serious, huh? And fast. Kind of a big deal, coming from the biggest commitment-phobe I've ever met, but I guess when you know, you know."

"Yeah," Emma agrees, "I guess with her it just feels *right."* She catches herself on the verge of letting out a dreamy sigh and snaps out of it just in time. Who the hell does she think she is? Nolan?

"Anyway, the custody stuff," Neal says, clearing his throat. "How would you feel about every other weekend - just to start. And maybe, like, all of his school vacations?"

"That's... yeah, that would be good," she replies, a bit surprised at his generosity. Then again, maybe he wants some alone time with his new girlfriend, too. "As long as it's okay with Henry, I mean."

"It will be," Neal declares confidently. "He definitely wants more time with you. And Regina. And the horse - mostly the horse, actually, but you guys, too."

Emma laughs and says, "Well, Regina and I and the horse all want more time with him, too."

"You guys aren't, like, living together now, are you?" he asks. "Because that would be _crazy fast, especially for you."

"We're not," she reassures him before remembering one of Saturday nights conversations. "But maybe soon. I don't know - I'm kind of excited to see what happens."

"Good. I'm really happy for you, Em," he says before hanging up.

Emma barely holds back a squeal as she presses the END button. She'd like to do a happy dance but wouldn't know the first way to go about it, so she settles for tossing her phone in the air and catching it with a flourish and a huge grin. She knows from experience that the tables could turn at any moment, but for once, it feels like everything is going right at the same time, and she'd like to celebrate.

xx

"Why, exactly, are we here?" Regina demands, plopping into their booth at Alberti's with little of her usual grace. "I spent all afternoon grilling vegetables, and –"

"And the lasagna will taste just as good tomorrow, when we *haven't* eaten it for, like, three days in a row. Come on, we ate the same thing for lunch and dinner yesterday."

"Because pizza has such a radically different flavor palate," Regina says sarcastically, but there's a small smile creeping on to her lips, and the glint in her eyes tells Emma her complaints are mostly in jest. "We could have eaten anywhere else – somewhere with *healthy* food."

Emma sits, back ramrod straight, and declares with all of the pomp and circumstance she can muster, "On this *monumentous* occasion, I thought that we should revisit the site of our first date."

"Again, I never figured you for the sentimental type," Regina teases. "Also, monumentous isn't a real word."

"Come on," whines Emma, "do we have to be grammatically correct when I'm trying to celebrate you? Today is a really big deal! You jumpstarted the adoption process for a couple of kids that you love *and* officially retired from BPD. I thought we'd eat our greasy, cheesy mess somewhere special."

"Neither of those things will be official for at least a month," Regina argues. "Or is there another *monumentous* thing you'd like to tell me about."

Emma scowls – apparently, Regina can read her way too well. "Um...I did a *lot* of paperwork today," she says proudly. "Locksley complimented me on my color-coding. And," she adds, suddenly speaking so quickly that Regina looks slightly confused, "I talked to Neal about getting more time with Henry and he said yes."

It takes Regina a few seconds to process, but when she does, her eyes light up. "You're right; that's absolutely worth celebrating," she exclaims.

"Yeah, so, I don't know," Emma mumbles, suddenly a bit uncomfortable. "Maybe it's not the greatest day in the history of the world, but it was definitely a good one for both of us, I think, and I thought that was worth acknowledging, especially after we've had so many awful ones recently."

"I can support that," Regina says, patting Emma's hand reassuringly.

"And you know," Emma continues, confidence slightly buoyed, "with everything kind of falling into place, maybe we'll finally get to a point where good days won't be a special occasion anymore, but until we're there... I don't know. Maybe it's a stupid thought." She's not sure what in their history would give her the idea that things could ever be easy.

Regina's brow furrows in confusion, and she asks, "What's so stupid about it?"

Sighing, Emma fidgets with the zipper of her red leather jacket, which she'd worn specially for this occasion. "I don't know. Maybe it's Henry getting into my head. Fairytale romance, they all lived happily ever after – but our life's not like that."

Regina looks thoughtful for a moment, reaching under the collar of her shirt to rub her finger against her engagement ring. "There's something Mary Margaret said to me – on the day of our first date, actually," she murmurs, chuckling quietly to herself. "She said that believing in even the possibility of a happy ending could be a powerful thing."

"Do you think she was right?" Emma asks cautiously.

Regina just shrugs. "I suppose we'll find out. I know I haven't – I mean, I've spent such a long time unable to believe, but when I'm with you...I don't know. I just do."

Emma's breath catches in her throat and her eyes start to itch as she leans across the table and grasps both of Regina's hands. "I believe too," she whispers. "Because of you, I believe."

Whether it's belief in happy endings or simply belief in each other, she's not sure, but as she looks into Regina's eyes and feels the warmth growing deep within her gut and emanating from both of them, she knows she's never felt more powerful.

"Then we'll see what happens," Regina says softly, and her smile tells Emma that she feels it, too.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"All men have the stars," he answered, "but they are not the same things for different people. For some, who are travelers, the stars are guides. For others they are no more than little lights in the sky. For others, who are scholars, they are problems. For my businessman they were wealth. But all these stars are silent. You-- you alone-- will have the stars as no one else has them--"

"What are you trying to say?"

"In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing. And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing, when you look at the sky at night...you – only you – will have stars that can laugh!"

And he laughed again.

"And when your sorrow is comforted (time soothes all sorrows) you will be content that you have known me. You will always be my friend. You will want to laugh with me. And you will sometimes open your window, so, for that pleasure... and your friends will be properly astonished to see you laughing as you look up at the sky! Then you will say to them, 'Yes, the stars always make me laugh!' And they will think you are crazy. It will be a very shabby trick that I shall have played on you..."

And he laughed again.

- from *The Little Prince*: Chapter 26 - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

xx

"Hi Daniel," Regina says shyly, clutching the bouquet of white roses so tightly she's afraid her fingers may remain permanently clenched around the stems, "it's...well, it's me, obviously." She gives an embarrassed chuckle and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm...I'm here. I'm sorry it's been so long."

Anxiously scuffing her feet, she kicks up patches of browned grass and showers her running shoes with the loose, parched dirt, and then she rolls her eyes at herself for waiting around like a piece of rock is going to verbally confirm that her apology's been accepted. "I'll...um...I guess I'll just have to assume you're listening," she mutters awkwardly.

After a quick scan of the dirt beside the headstone – no spiders: he always knew to kill them before she came into the room – she kneels down and clears her throat, waiting for the right words to pop into her head. They don't. "Daniel, I...I don't know how to do this," she finally admits. "I always thought it was stupid, and – and maybe I still do, I suppose. Marian was always trying to be spiritual, remember? She thought I should be able to feel your presence or something like that, but...well, obviously, I didn't."

She sighs and leans heavily against the stone – might as well be comfortable – and continues, "I don't know if I do now, either, but here I

am. I guess...I don't know. I guess this is one of those things that needs to be said more than it needs to be heard."

Kind of like the incredibly shrill bird chirping right next to them. Perhaps Eva Blanchard's grave is nearby.

She smirks and winces at the same time.

"Daniel, I loved you so much!" she bursts out. "And every day I had to live without you was just...it was agony. I told myself I'd never forget you, and I'd honor your memory and make a ritual of visiting you and all of it, but...I didn't. I was just...oh god, Daniel, I was such a mess. I couldn't let you see me like that. I – I know it sounds silly, doesn't it? Hiding from someone who's not even there. You'd probably laugh at me. That's all I ever wanted, you know," she adds with the smallest of laughs. "For eleven years, all I wanted every second of every day was to hear you laugh."

She still wants it, just a little bit.

"After a while...I don't know. I suppose the avoidance became its own ritual."

The bird's flown a little closer, but it's quieted down the shrieking. She offers it a benevolent smile – *as if birds can understand human facial gestures*, she thinks, rolling her eyes again – and wonders if perhaps she actually appreciates the company.

"Anyway, I guess I'm here now because I'm no longer a mess, or at least I'm less of a mess," she clarifies with another nervous chuckle, "but I...I'm working on it. I'll probably always be working on it, but...well, for now, it's acceptable. I met someone – I'm dating that someone, actually. Maybe it's a bit of a low blow to come back here just to tell you that – is it?" She takes the silence to mean no. "Good. I had hoped...I suppose I hoped you'd be proud of me. Are you?"

More silence. This time, she'd like to assume it means yes.

"Thank you," she whispers, resting her head against the stone. "Her name is Emma. You'd love her," she tells him. "Actually, you know her – you apparently saved her from jumping off a bridge when she was seventeen. I guess you told her that she could make something of her life and be a good parent, and...well, you were right." She smiles wistfully and adds, "You were always right."

"Her son's name is Henry," she whispers, like it's a big secret and she's not just talking to herself in an empty cemetery. "She actually wanted to name him after you, but you never told her your name. Idiot."

She exhales and says, "Anyway, we're very happy together. So far. And...well, I'm retiring from the force. I'm sort of being forced into it, but I suppose it's for the best. And if all goes according to plan, I'll be adopting two little girls soon. That'll be...it'll be an adventure. I don't know if I'm ready." Lips pressed tightly together, she gives her head a quick shake. "After all this time, I still don't know if I'm ready to be a mother. But I suppose after all this time, I should have figured out that

the fates or whoever's in charge don't really care what I'm ready for. I know I'm ready to start moving forward again, though."

The bird is now perched on top of the headstone, and Regina stares hard at it for a moment, chewing at her lower lip. "I miss you, Daniel. I don't know that I'll ever stop missing you. But I've finally decided that everything is going to be fine, and I just wanted you to know that." Rising stiffly, she deposits the bouquet of flowers in front of the headstone and waits like she's expecting some sort of sign that she's been heard.

But there's nothing. The birds chirp, the breeze swirls around her, and the car horns of the evening rush hour crowd continue their unabated honking.

But then again, she didn't say any of it for his benefit, and maybe that's okay.

"I love you, Daniel," she whispers, fingertip lightly tracing the inscription on the inside of her ring. *The most powerful magic of all.* Then she turns and watches as the bird flutters its wings a few times before flying off into the sunset, returning to its nest.

And she returns to hers.

xx

"Swan, can I see you in my office?" Locksley calls the second she walks into the station.

She stops short just in front of her chair, startled. "Yeah, sure," she mutters. *What is it this time?* Somehow, in Regina's absence, she's been billed as Locksley's second-in-command even though she's she most junior member of the squad.

It's not that she minds it; having the confidence of her commanding officer is a good thing, but she's pretty sure it's either because Regina told Locksley (more like threatened him, probably) to take special care of her, or Locksley has convinced himself that she knows more than she does just because she spent a few months being trained by the mythical Detective Mills, and neither prospect is appealing to her.

"I've found you a new desk mate," he says brightly when she enters his office, and Emma is momentarily shocked but not particularly surprised to see Officer Fa – or, if her new gold badge is any indication, *Detective* Fa – standing next to him.

"Congratulations," Emma responds, leaning in to shake Mulan's hand. "Welcome to the squad."

The rookie detective just nods, looking slightly overwhelmed. Locksley continues, "I told her you're the point person for all of her questions

except anything about the best area donut shops. You can point out Humbert for those kinds of things."

"I don't eat donuts," Mulan mutters on their way out. "More of a savory kind of person. Do you know anywhere around here that serves good burgers?"

Emma smirks as she points Mulan to her seat and thinks that maybe working here without Regina won't be the worst thing ever. There may even be a few advantages to her replacement.

xx

"Are you ready?" Regina asks gently. She's got the horse all saddled and ready to go, but the greenish tint of Emma's cheeks and her violently trembling hands are apparently giving her pause. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

"I want to," Emma mutters. "I just... Henry will probably kill me if I chicken out now, right?" The look he'd given her when he'd galloped off with Big Henry – after Emma had complained that his scrutiny was stressing her out – had said as much.

"No. Well, yes, he might be slightly disappointed, but he certainly won't kill you." Emma gulps and nods, and after a moment of silence, Regina adds, "And neither will this horse. Phoenix is really quite gentle."

"Yeah, right. And quite *large*."

Regina shrugs. "He's a horse, dear. It's in his DNA."

"I know, but..." she trails off as another wave of nausea overtakes her, and Regina smiles sympathetically.

"I don't think you're riding today," she says knowingly. "Maybe you can just touch him for a second and then help my mother in the house; I think she's trying to set up guest rooms for the kids, and I'm not one hundred percent comfortable with her moving furniture all by herself."

"Right," Emma sighs. Petting a horse is definitely something she can do, right? Clutching Regina's hand tightly, she inches closer to Phoenix and tentatively reaches out to touch his nose.

Smiling proudly at her, Regina asks, "It's not so bad, is it?"

Emma nods. "It's alright," she agrees, chuckling a little when Phoenix affectionately blows on her hand. "You're pretty nice," she tells him. "Maybe I'll ride you...someday."

"Well, we have time," says Regina. "Now go make sure my mother doesn't break her hip before we ruin all of your progress by pushing too hard."

"Yes ma'am," Emma replies, giving a mock salute before she jogs up to the house. She pauses about halfway up the hill and turns just in time to watch Regina mount the horse and ride majestically off into the sunset – well, the apple orchard, anyway – in pursuit of the Henrys, and she grins.

Because they have time, and she's excited to use every minute of it.

xx

"Members of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have, Your Honor. On the first count of the indictment, the murder of Aurora Arendt, we find the defendant, Albert Spencer, guilty."

"Yes!" Emma whispers into Regina's ear, pumping her fist.

"On the second count of the indictment, the murder of Phillip Arendt, we find the defendant guilty."

Locksley, sitting on Regina's other side, reaches out to squeeze her hand.

"On the third count of the indictment, the attempted murder of Malinda Black, we find the defendant guilty. On the fourth count of the indictment, kidnapping in the first degree, we find the defendant guilty."

Regina forces herself off the wooden bench and strides out the door with her head almost painfully erect, ignoring quiet protests from both Emma and Robin.

They mean well, but they don't get it.

She makes it to the bathroom and locks herself into a stall before she loses it, crying and beating her fists against the unsympathetic metal door.

Spencer's getting *at least* two consecutive life sentences, probably closer to three. The statute of limitations on what he'd done to her has already run out, but he'll still be spending what's left of his miserable life in prison, and she's getting love and family and a second chance at happiness.

It should be enough for her.

It isn't.

She's mostly calmed herself by the time Emma comes barging in and starts banging on the door. "Regina, talk to me," she calls from just outside the stall, her voice unnecessarily loud considering there's only about a foot between them. "You okay?"

"Yes!" she hollers back. And then she remembers she's supposed to be practicing honesty, and she softly corrects herself. "No, I'm not."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Regina sighs. *Just be here*, she wants to reply. Instead, she counts to ten and then opens the door and pulls Emma tightly against her, inhaling the unpleasant but somehow comforting smell of rain-dampened leather while Emma's fingers gently brush away her tears.

"I love you," Emma whispers, and Regina leans her cheek against Emma's palm and forces herself to smile. "You're going to be fine – I promise."

"I know." She stares into Emma's eyes and feels the devotion and hope shining out of them as it seeps into her soul and warms every inch of her. "I know," she repeats, louder and stronger. "I'll drive you back to the station?"

Emma shrugs one shoulder, and they hold onto each other for just a moment longer before Regina finally straightens and clears her throat. Taking Emma's hand, she steps out of the restroom and into a hallway teeming with reporters.

It's going to be fine, she repeats over and over in her head.

And it is.

xx

"Alright," says Sara, "their bags are packed and Emma's finished buckling in the car seats. I guess this is it."

"I guess it is," Regina agrees. "Elsa, honey, why don't you say goodbye to Sara?" She doesn't bother to ask Anna the same question – the eleven-month-old is sound asleep in the social worker's arms and will

probably be out for a while. Anna, it seems, has two settings now that she's learned to crawl: hyperactive and dead to the world.

"W'gina," Elsa asks seriously, "are we *weally* going to live at your house?"

"Yes, really."

"Like a sleepover?"

"No, this time It'll be a forever sleepover," Regina replies. "That's okay with you, right?"

"Yes!" Elsa exclaims, diving into Regina's arms and grinning widely. She seems mildly sorry to part with Sara ("Come visit anytime," Regina offers), but she spends the entire car ride chattering excitedly about all of the books they're going to read together, and Regina allows herself to hope that no one involved will be too traumatized by the transition. *Kids are resilient*, Hopper had told her. *I have no doubt that these girls will be able to thrive with a stable environment and your support.*

"Hey, kid," Emma says lightly as they pull up in front of Regina's building, "you've got some grandparents and a sort of older brother-slash-friend in that apartment who are really excited to meet you, but if it's too much, I can tell them to go away. What do you think?"

"Gwandparents?" Elsa asks curiously, which Emma takes as a yes.

"They're a little bit crazy," Regina warns, "but I think you'll like them."

"Okay," the little girl says agreeably.

They open the door to as much chaos as three people could have created on their own – Cora and both Henrys throwing confetti, with a huge princess cake set out on the table and a huge, homemade "Happy Adoption Day" banner adorning the wall. "Welcome home!" Emma exclaims.

Elsa spends most of the evening with her head buried in Regina's sweater, occasionally allowing Henry to speak to her, while Anna babbles happily at everyone as they pass her around. "This is your family," Emma tells the beaming baby. "Enjoy their weirdness."

At night, when Cora and Big Henry have finally left, Regina tries to stifle a yawn and asks the girls, "Are you ready to get set up in your new room?"

Anna, who's apparently already asleep again, responds with a snore, but Elsa whimpers and protests, "But we having a sleepover!"

"Yeah, W'gina, we having a sleepover," Emma says, pretending to pout. Elsa giggles. "C'mon, Henry – do you want to get in on this?"

"I don't recall inviting any of you to a sleepover," Regina mutters, watching amusedly as Emma carries Anna into her bedroom with Henry dragging Elsa by the hand behind her. The four of them sprawl across Regina's bed, and Emma looks up, smirking, as she pats the small space next to her.

"Come on, W'gina, it's really comfortable here!" Emma whines.

Regina briefly considers getting her camera to capture their first major family moment, but in the end she decides to enjoy it for what it is, curling against Emma's side as Elsa dives on top of her.

"What do you think we should do at this sleepover?" she asks, running her finger along the smooth, warm skin of Anna's cheek. "Watch a movie? Play a game?"

"How about some reading?" Emma suggests. "I think Henry wrote a special bedtime story just for the occasion."

Clearing his throat dramatically, Henry kneels on the mattress and puffs out his chest as he begins to read. "Once upon a time, there were two princesses named Elsa and Anna..."

xx

"This is a pretty nice place," Cora observes, looking around the living room of the new apartment with poorly disguised shock. "Did you two really buy this?"

"We did," Regina confirms. "We'll be moving in as soon as we're done setting things up."

"How did you –"

"Mother, just because we're not fabulously wealthy, it doesn't mean we're poor either!" she exclaims irritably, rolling her eyes. Then she stops and forces herself to breathe.

Her mother is trying.

She's really, truly trying her hardest to contain her judgment.

And it's working... for the most part. The girls love their grandma, and she's been incredibly helpful in taking care of them while Regina has

been busy renovating the new place and working part time with a state commission on police corruption after Sid (according to rumors, anyway) had personally recommended her to the governor, even cutting back her hours at the firm the way she'd always refused to do when Regina was a child.

Apparently, being a grandmother can change someone, though seventy years of rigidity can't be reversed all at once.

"Okay, Miss Anna, I'm going to put you down now," Cora informs the squirming toddler in her arms. Setting Anna down on the floor, she kisses Regina on the cheek and says, "I'll just say goodbye to Henry and then see myself out. Your father will bring Elsa back in about half an hour. He says he's taking her to the Disney store after her appointment."

Regina groans. "I told him not to spoil her," she complains under her breath. "We won't have enough closet space for all of her princess dresses."

"I don't think he can help himself," Cora chuckles, rolling her eyes. "I haven't seen him this happy since you were in preschool. Don't worry, she'll turn out okay – you did."

"Say bye to Grandma," Regina whispers to Anna before she can stumble away. She's not moving particularly gracefully yet, but she's *fast*.

"Bye Gamma!"

After a quick peek into Henry's new room, where he and Emma are supposed to be painting a fairytale-themed mural on the wall, Cora excuses herself at the same time Emma, wearing a paint-splattered smock, appears in the hall, a flat box clutched behind her back. "Welcome home, beautiful," she says, lifting Anna up by the waist and swinging her around with one arm until she squeals gleefully, before softly kissing Regina's lips. "How's the new job?"

"Still fine," Regina replies, taking just a second to let her head rest against Emma's shoulder. "How's the new apartment."

"It's good," says Emma, although the face she pulls says otherwise. "We're experiencing some minor technical difficulties on the painting – someone's perfectionist tendencies started coming into play."

"Let Henry paint the mural the way he wants," Regina teases. "He's the one who's going to be staring at the mistakes every night."

Every night.

It almost gives her chills to say it.

"Speaking of things to look at every night, I... um, I may have rescued something from your old apartment. It's not much, and we don't have to put it up anywhere, but I just thought..."

Voice trailing off helplessly, Emma thrusts the box at Regina and chews her lower lip. Confused, Regina slowly unwraps it, one eye on Anna to ensure no more cans of paint get overturned in this renovation process. She gasps when she opens it, feeling a lump rise in her throat. "Emma, you didn't... how did you get this?"

"Turns out your dad never throws anything away – he had it in the basement. Is – are you alright?"

Blinking back tears, Regina nods. Staring up from the frame is a toothy cartoon horse, cut from the wallpaper she'd selected for the nursery all those years ago.

"I thought, you know, it might be hard for you to leave him behind," Emma mumbles. "'Cause you said...you know, at the old apartment. And this way, you don't have to."

She doesn't have words. She doesn't know if there *are* words. Thankfully, Emma seems to understand and just silently holds Regina until she can speak again.

"Do you mind if we put this in our bedroom?" she asks hesitantly. "I – if you don't want –"

"Yeah, no, I don't mind. Put it wherever you think is best," Emma replies. "I think our bedroom would be perfect. I – actually, I was afraid you'd try to put a portrait of a real horse in there, and I don't think I could handle looking at one while I was trying to sleep. This is much better."

"Idiot," Regina mutters, silencing the other woman's babbling with a firm kiss. "Now let's see how that mural's coming along."

"Come on, Anna, let's go see your brother's mess of a room. It's already a disaster and he hasn't even moved into it yet," laughs Emma, holding Anna's hand tightly as the little girl toddles along beside her so she can't wander off. "And no playing in the wet paint."

Regina can see the makings of a scene beginning to emerge on a wall that had previously been a rather depressing shade of "hospital mint." There are some outlines of trees, a few sparkles that are maybe supposed to be fairies, and what looks to be the outline of a person on a horse all starting to take shape.

"I think it looks wonderful," she says, smiling proudly at Henry. "The only problem is that it's not done yet."

"Not my fault," he grumbles with a glare at Emma. "*Someone* has an awful lot of opinions for the amount of brushstrokes she takes."

"And what do you have to say to that, Detective Swan?" Regina scolds, as she carefully lifts a giggling Anna up and away from the purple paint she'd been about to stick her hand in.

Emma shrugs and returns to her work, flicking a glob of paint at Henry when she thinks he's not looking. "Mom, this stuff isn't washable!" he protests.

"Yeah, that's why you're wearing a smock, doofus," she replies, smirking, and pokes her paintbrush under his arm.

Henry squeals, "That tickles!" Eyes flashing with mischief, he paints a long line down Emma's back and cackles gleefully.

"Henwy's painting!" Anna cheers, clapping her hands.

"Yes, he is, but not where he should be." Regina checks her watch and wonders if they'll have made *any* progress by the time Neal arrives to take Henry back to New York.

Probably not, but she supposes they'll all survive.

"Regina, help!" begs Henry, ducking behind her just as Emma dives in with her brush, smearing paint across Regina and Anna's cheeks by accident. Henry gasps before letting out a nervous giggle. "You're in so

much trouble!" he taunts, darting away to hide behind his only half assembled bedframe, but Regina can't stop laughing.

Finally, after so many years without hope, she thinks she can finally see a happy ending on the horizon.

No, not a happy ending. Her story isn't over, and for once, she's grateful for that. Grateful and excited to start the next chapter.

xx

"Regina!" Emma gasps.

"No, shh..." Regina whispers in between kisses, placing her free hand over Emma's lips. "Henry's sleeping on the other side of that wall."

"Do not—" Emma hisses "—talk about---our children—when your fingers are inside of me."

"What do you want me to talk about, then?" she asks mischievously. "Tax returns?"

"Regina!" Chest heaving, Emma manages to wriggle away from the wall and push Regina off of her just long enough to ask, "Can we at least do it on the other side of the room? I don't want any... interruptions."

Regina smirks. "Me neither. I want you all to myself. Which is why," she explains, nipping playfully at Emma's lower lip while her fingers tease their way around her clit, never applying more than frustratingly gentle pressure before easing up, "you need to hurry up and come before the nightmare rush starts."

"That would be much easier if you'd stop playing with your food before you eat it," Emma grits out, back arching as Regina thrusts again and pushes her against the closet door.

"Where's the fun in that?" Regina complains, but she obligingly sinks down to the floor until she's kneeling before Emma, grinning up like a madwoman with eyes so dark and lustful that Emma has to grab the doorknob so her knees don't give out then and there. "Very wet," she observes with a satisfied nod as her fingers wrap around the insides of Emma's thighs, and Emma feels a strangled sound that's about halfway between a laugh and a moan issue from her throat as she feels Regina's tongue brush between her legs.

"Come on, Regina," she grunts, trying desperately to keep her voice to a whisper. "Please just fuck me before someone wakes up."

They've been interrupted before, and it was far from enjoyable.

"Maybe, since you said please," Regina teases, and Emma thinks she feels her eyes roll to the back of her head as Regina's tongue slips back inside her, and her fingers curl around Regina's sweaty brown locks in a futile attempt to keep herself upright as her body jerks with pleasure, out of her control.

When Emma comes, she quickly presses a hand to her mouth to silence her moan, and she sinks to the floor beside Regina, struggling to catch her breath. "New apartment successfully broken in, *finally*. No interruptions," she whispers as she pulls Regina against her and somehow brings both of their bodies crashing down to the floor.

"No interruptions," agrees Regina, pressing a quick kiss against Emma's lips and smiling. Emma rests her hand just above Regina's hip, thumb lightly rubbing the scar on there as she stares into Regina's eyes and thinks about how lucky she is. They lie there for about two minutes, unwilling to move, until a high-pitched cry pierces the still night air, and Regina sighs.

"Perfect timing," she mutters as she stands up and pulls on her robe. "I'm getting good at this." Emma watches Regina's back guiltily as she strides out of the room, gray fleece fluttering behind her. *Not enough time to return the favor,* she internally scolds herself.

Hours later, when they're finally in bed, fingers intertwined over the girls' sleeping bodies, Emma says softly, "I owe you next time."

Regina yawns, eyes half shut, and murmurs, "We're not keeping score. I love you."

"I love you, too." Very carefully so as not to wake the kids, Emma pushes up on one arm and leans over to kiss Regina's temple. "G'night, family," she whispers before snuggling back under the blankets and letting herself finally drift off to sleep.

xx

"Alright," Regina says, panting, "we're just a mile from the finish. We should be seeing our family any minute now."

Emma is breathing too heavily to reply, but there's a certain giddiness that rises within her chest when Regina says "our family" that helps her power on, in spite of her blistered feet and aching knee. It's a year later than they'd originally planned, but she and Regina are finally running the New York City Marathon, and there's a huge crowd waiting for them around the next corner.

"There they are!" Henry shouts. "Elsa – there's our moms!"

He and Elsa, who's sitting on top of Neal's shoulders, start cheering wildly, while Anna looks up from her warm nest in Cora's arms like she has no idea what's happening. Next to them, Big Henry is holding a sign with Tamara's help, and Locksley, Roland on his back, lets out a shrill whistle. David and Mary Margaret are a few feet past the others, just back from their honeymoon – Emma has no idea where the hell Mary Margaret got her hands on rainbow-colored pom-poms. She laughs and tries to disguise her limp as they run past their shockingly large fan club, but Regina shoots her a worried look in between blowing kisses to the kids.

"You okay?" she mutters as soon as they're out of everyone's sight.

Emma groans. "Yeah, I'll make it. I'm gonna need, like, three burgers and a pitcher of beer when this is over, though. Maybe a massage, too."

"Not me," Regina jokes. "In fact, I think I'll just keep going all the way back to Boston."

"You do that. Call me when your runner's high wears off and you're stranded on the side of the highway."

Regina checks her watch and grins. "We're well below the cut-off to qualify for Boston," she reports, "and Henry promised to write me another Queen Regina story if I beat you."

"No kidding," Emma replies with a breathless laugh. "He promised to get straight A's in all his classes except gym if I beat *you*."

Regina picks up the pace and Emma follows beat behind – she's a stronger sprinter, but her legs are shot after so many miles and Regina's got years more training under her belt. Still, she manages to pull ahead about a hundred meters from the finish, just before she hears Regina half-laugh, half-wheeze and practically trip over her own feet in an attempt to get even.

She grabs Emma's hand and they finish the race together.

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